

“Stardust, Memory, and Holy Books: Innovations and Influence of Orphism as
Fringe Religion”

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Abstract

The mystery tradition known as Orphism is often misunderstood, largely due to the lack of evidence in existence. Mystery traditions are initiatory in nature; to reveal the secret information to non-initiates was forbidden, in some instances punishable by death. This secretive nature of mystery traditions makes it very difficult for modern scholars to discern what actually occurred within the cult. The Orphic mystery tradition is unique among ancient Greco-Roman cults. Whereas mainstream Greco-Roman cults were sanctioned by the state, with rituals that followed a set format of sacrifice and feasting, the Orphic tradition was a secret initiatory tradition, with written rituals relying heavily on sacred texts. The Orphic tradition is also unique in that, rather than operating out of temples, it has no set center of worship. Rather, itinerant priests traveled from location to location with their holy books, seeking individual worshippers. Because they traveled to different locations, the tradition is eclectic, as the priests combined local traditions with their own. This makes studying Orphism quite difficult, as one must separate the local customs with the Orphic teachings.

This eclectic nature has caused many modern scholars to assert that Orphism was not a set tradition, focusing on the regional variants as proof. However, by studying the extant Orphic texts within each individual context, common themes emerge that indicate a more solid tradition, contradicting modern scholarly thought. The studying of the Orphic tradition via the extant religious texts presents a unique challenge to scholars; many of the extant texts are fairly recent discoveries, found not in monasteries and private collections, but buried within followers' tombs or under the sands of Hellenistic Egypt. As such, there is very little documentation of the transmission of the ideas contained within. In addition, there is a great likelihood that many of the Orphic texts began as oral tradition, since they often contain formulaic phrases. Martin West indicates that when dealing with ancient texts, particularly fragments, it is necessary to include the context when attempting any sort of textual criticism of ancient texts; this context is vital to deciphering the regional variations from the core ideas as well as identifying the true meaning of the text itself. By studying the use of these formulaic phrases throughout the Orphic texts, combined with ideas that are decidedly Orphic in nature, a relationship between the texts emerges that indicates that there is a core set of ideas for the cult, despite the regional variations.

In the twentieth century, works on Orphism by Otto and Guthrie asserted a true, cohesive Orphic tradition. However, as more texts were discovered by archaeologists, other scholars refuted this idea, instead holding to the bricoleur theory as described by Graf. While the bricoleur theory has a number of merits, it focuses too sharply on differences rather than commonalities. I propose an alternative bricoleur theory, based on analysis of the texts. I believe the Orphic priests engaged in bricolage by combining local customs with their existing tradition; however, there was a core tradition circulating in the Greco-Roman world via the information in the priests' holy

books. This study analyzes the texts currently classified as 'Orphic,' in order to determine how the formulaic phrases and ideas contained within the texts might have been transmitted.

Keyword: Orphism, Graeco-Roman cults

Stardust, Memory, and Holy Books: Innovation and Influence of Orphism as Fringe Religion

The mystery tradition known as Orphism is largely misunderstood due to the lack of cohesive evidence in existence. Mystery traditions are initiatory in nature and to reveal the secret information to non-initiates was forbidden. This secretive nature of mystery traditions makes it difficult for modern scholars to discern what actually occurred within the cult. This is especially true within the Orphic tradition, as the cult's many idiosyncrasies make it particularly difficult for modern scholars to research. While other traditions operated out of temples to their respective deities, the Orphic cult relied on itinerant priests (*orpheotelestai*), who traveled from location to location seeking individual worshippers. These priests carried holy books that contained written rituals and sacred texts, making it a fringe tradition in the Graeco-Roman world. Because the priests traveled, the tradition melded with local customs, creating regional variations. As a result, modern scholars must separate local customs from Orphic core teachings when trying to study the trajectory of Orphism as a cult.

The eclectic nature of Orphism has caused many modern scholars to assert that Orphism was not an actual set tradition in the vein of other mystery cults such as the Eleusinian tradition, focusing on the regional variants as proof. However, by studying the extant Orphic material within their respective contexts, common themes emerge that indicate a much more solid tradition, contradicting much of the current scholarly thought. The studying of the Orphic tradition via the extant religious texts presents a unique challenge to scholars; many of the extant texts are fairly recent discoveries, found not in monasteries and private collections, but buried within followers' tombs or under the sands of Hellenistic Egypt. As such, there is very little documentation of the transmission of the ideas contained within. In addition, there is a great likelihood that many of the Orphic texts began as oral tradition, since they often contain formulaic phrases. Martin West indicates that when dealing with ancient texts, particularly fragments, it is necessary to include the context when attempting any sort of textual criticism of ancient texts; this context is vital to deciphering the regional variations from the core ideas as well as identifying the true meaning of the text itself (West, 1973). Studying these formulaic phrases is one way to follow the transmission of the texts and the ideas they hold.

The Orphic texts were discovered throughout the entire Graeco-Roman world. The oldest of the texts were found in Olbia, in Asia Minor, and in Magna Graecia, in southern Italy. Other texts dating to the Hellenistic period were found in Macedonia, Thessaly, Crete, and Egypt, while the most recent of the texts were found in Rome, or in medieval manuscripts, thus losing the original context. What is significant about the Orphic texts is that none of the texts were found in major *poleis* such as Athens or Corinth, indicating that these rites did not flourish in these areas. By tracing the trajectory of Orphic worship through the linguistic evidence as well as the archaeological context, the evolution of Orphism as a cult will become clear; the regional variations do not detract from the fact that there is in fact a core tradition.

A study by Akiva and Koppel presents a novel way of analyzing a corpus of texts in which multiple authors are involved, 'decomposing' the texts into its core parts (Koppel & Akiva, A Generic

Unsupervised Method for Decomposing Multi-Author Documents, 2013). The study analyzes texts based on lexical stylistic markers, and has some promising uses in the realm of Orphic textual analysis. However, there are some very strong limitations that the study cannot account for. First, the study does not take into account the fact that many of the texts were copied verbatim from holy book to holy book as they were passed down. In addition, particularly in the case of the gold lamellae, the texts were copied from holy books, often by scribes who charged by the letter. This fact introduces a number of variables to the equation, including the possible socioeconomic status of the followers (which is up to conjecture). This is one possibility for the immense amount of variation among the gold lamellae, as the length of the texts varies dramatically between full texts to only the initiate's name (and in one instance, no inscription at all). Furthermore, it does not always account for the regional variations inherent in Orphism; when combining these facts, it makes distinguishing between authors virtually impossible in many instances.

The gold lamellae are unique in the archaeological and epigraphical record for a variety of reasons. Approximately forty of these incised gold tablets have been found buried in graves throughout the Mediterranean, from a span of time ranging from the fifth century BCE to the third century CE. While they have been described as 'Orphic' since Comparetti's analysis in 1879, what this term means exactly is still heatedly debated among scholars. One problem with the lamellae is that there is no mention of them in literary sources from the periods that produced them. The gold lamellae bear some resemblance to the *defixiones*, or lead curse tablets; both date to approximately the fifth century BCE. However, unlike *defixiones*, the gold lamellae contain a narrative. This narrative is indicative that it could have belonged to an initiation ritual that the deceased had completed. In addition, the archaeological context provides few clues, if the context was noted at time of excavation. There is also debate as to who utilized the tradition of the Orphic lamellae. Guthrie, for example, believed the lamellae to be a product of the lower classes, while other scholars like Musti believed the lamellae began with the aristocracy and worked its way down from them. The great variation in length of the lamellae indicates that initiates from different classes were followers. Some of the lamellae, then, contain a full narrative, while others contain only the deceased's name and the word *mystes*- 'initiate.' While the diversity of followers can account for some of the variation, it cannot account for all of the variation, as some lamellae of similar length contain very different passages.

Edmonds, for example, rightly acknowledged the use of bricolage by the various authors of the lamellae to manipulate common sets of traditional elements for their own purposes, a theory also held by Graf and Johnston. The bricolage theory has many merits, as it explains the many variations in the tablets. As early as the fifth century BCE, Plato made mention of itinerant *orpheotelestai*, referring to them as 'con men.' These *orpheotelestai* were considered 'men of the book' and went door to door with their books of poetry, writings, and incantations, offering people the chance for salvation. In any case of bricolage, there is ultimately an original source of inspiration for the first bricoleur to draw upon when creating a new tradition. This original source of inspiration, in the instance of the lamellae, was a syncretic blend of mythologies and traditions

surrounding a Dionysiac mystery tradition, blended with local customs and beliefs. The result is a widely varied belief system that spans several centuries and covers all of Greece, including the islands, and Italy. The lamellae are referred to as 'Orphic' because of their references to Persephone, Dionysus/Bacchus, and other deities associated with Dionysiac cult. However, many scholars have fallen into the trap of finding references to the dismemberment myth of Dionysus Zagreus by the Titans in the lamellae before there were references made in the literature.

There are two main exemplars within the corpus of the lamellae. The first exemplar is first witnessed in the Hipponion tablet, which dates to about 400 BCE. The lamella contains formulaic phrases that are found dispersed throughout at least eleven other lamellae, including a nearly identical one found at Petelia, dating to about 350 BCE (phrases noted in italics):

This grave belongs to Mnemosyne, for the time when he shall die, *on the right side of the well-fitted house of Hades is a spring, and close to this stands a shining cypress: Around this place the descending souls cool themselves. Do not approach this spring. But proceed to the lake of Mnemosyne with cold water flowing forth:* There are Guardians here: and they will ask you with shrewd speech what you are looking for in the darkness of deadly Hades. *Say: "I am a son of Earth and starry Heaven: and I am parched with thirst and perishing: But give me to drink from the cold water from Mnemosyne's lake."* And they will show you to the Chthonian king: and give you to drink from Mnemosyne's lake: And then you will walk on the holy path of the many, on which also other renowned mystai and bakkhoi walk.¹

The lamellae show varying levels of bricolage depending on what most concerned the deceased (Edmonds, 2004). For example, the role of Mnemosyne is prevalent in the regions having a strong Pythagorean influence, notably in Pythagorean centers of Magna Graecia. Pythagoreanism had a strong influence in Magna Graecia until the fifth century BCE, when it began to be persecuted and the cult went into hiding. The inclusion of drinking from the spring of Mnemosyne has important implications particularly from a Pythagorean perspective, as implies a possible belief in reincarnation, allowing the initiate to remember the current life in preparation for the next incarnation. It is also significant that these tablets have been found in the Greek colonies, rather than the mainland. When placed in this context, the use of giving directions to an elevated state in the afterlife serves as an allegory to returning to the motherland. Given the distance to be traveled to experience the blessings that initiation at Eleusis offered, it was only a matter of time before someone capitalized on the situation, offering an alternative for those displaced from their home.

A tablet found in Thessalia, in central Greece, is the first of several abbreviated versions of the Hipponion tablet. The Thessalia lamella contains several of the formulaic phrases from the Hipponion lamella; these formulaic phrases are also found in a number of lamellae from Crete. The Cretan lamellae are virtually identical to that found at Thessalia. However, when looking at

¹ Hipponion Tablet, ca 400 BCE, translated by S. Torjussen.

the original Greek, there are misspellings and slight variations, which indicate that these were copied from an original. The Cretan and Thessalian lamellae transform the text into a dialogue between the deceased and entities he encounters, which is a strong indication that it was part of a ritual. Given the longer length of the Hipponion and Petelia lamellae, it is likely that these lamellae recite a more complete version of the same ritual.

“I am parched with thirst and I perish. But drink of me, the ever-flowing spring, where on the right side is a shining cypress. Who are you? Where are you from? I am a son of Earth and starry Heaven. But my race is of Heaven alone.”

When looking at the Cretan lamellae it is important to consider their context, just as it is vital to consider the context of the lamellae from Magna Graecia. Crete held a special place in the archaic and classical period for producing great heroes and religious leaders. It was both located in the middle of nowhere and the center of the Mediterranean, on the periphery of mainland Greece, and viewed as a ‘wonderland’ of sorts because of its real and perceived antiquity (Tzifopoulos, *Paradise Earned: The Bacchic-Orphic Gold Lamellae of Crete*). According to Diodorus, the rites that Eleusis kept secret, Crete made available to all of its citizens. Diodorus utilized Epimenides, the Cretan theologos par excellence of the archaic period, as one of his main sources, which lends credence to the Cretan claim to provenance of mystery cults in Greece. The Cretans were also known for orgiones, mystery rites of both Demeter and Dionysus (Tzifopoulos, *Paradise Earned: The Bacchic-Orphic Gold Lamellae of Crete*).

One of the great ‘Cretan Paradoxes’ is the concept of a god who is eternal yet dies and is reborn. While this concept is applied to gods of fertility in other parts of Greece, in Crete it is found in the figure of Zeus Kretagenes. The notion that the head of the Olympians was subject to the cycles of nature was foreign to the rest of Greece; thus, Zeus Kretagenes was adapted as the chthonic Dionysus. Indeed, the two traditions are quite similar, as the Cretan tradition holds that Zeus had a tomb, variously at Ida and Dikte, whereas Dionysus had a tomb at Delphi (Tzifopoulos, *Paradise Earned: The Bacchic-Orphic Gold Lamellae of Crete*).

The second exemplar found in the lamellae center around those found at Thurii around 350 BCE. The Thurii tablets contain a distinct ritual formula that links them together, indicating they come from the same tradition. This similarity, coupled with the fact that they all occurred within a ten year period, provide compelling evidence that the lamellae were all created by the same bricoleur/orpheotelestai.

Pure I come out of the pure, Queen of the Underworld,
 And both Eukles and Eubouleus and all the other immortal Gods:
 For I too maintain to be of your blessed kind,
 But Fate subdued me, and all the other immortal gods and the star-flunged thunderbolt.
 And I have flown out of the grievous, troublesome circle,
 I have passed with swift feet to the desired wreath,
 I have entered under the bosom of the lady of the house, the Queen of the Underworld,

I have passed with swift feet from the desired wreath
 Happy and Blessed, you shall become god, the opposite of mortal.
 A kid I have fallen into milk.

The most striking feature of these lamellae is the 'immersion in milk' formula, which Torjussen and other scholars rightly argue illustrate part of an initiation ritual. Milk is a powerful symbol of a soul's purity and its potential for rebirth. Milk is linked to the stars and heavens, notably the Milky Way, in literature from as early as the seventh century BCE. 'Righteous souls' reside among the stars in the Milky Way after death rather than going to Hades. This sort of belief is not without precedent, as it was not uncommon for heroes to be turned into stars or constellations after death as a reward by the gods. Many scholars, including Torjussen, argue against Dieterich's literal interpretation of the passage in an initiatory ritual context, akin to a baptism rite, despite the use of similar rituals being used by other mystery traditions, including the cult of Mithras.

Also significant in the Thurii tablets is the opening phrase 'Pure I come out of the pure.' This purity refers to the initiated status of the deceased, and the pure life lead by the initiate, which separates initiates from the rest of the dead. This first line is found not only in the Thurii tablets but in other tablets, showing that ritual purity was important to the people using these lamellae.

The Thurii tablets were the inspiration for other lamellae in the region. The Rome tablet has elements of both the Thurii tablets and the Hipponion tablet:

Pure she come out of the pure, Queen of the Underworld, Eukles and Eubouleus, fair child of Zeus: I have the gift of Mnemosyne, famous among men. Caecilia Secundina, forward, by law, to become godlike.

The first line is verbatim from the Thurii tablets, bringing a five hundred year continuity to the lamellae. The mention of Mnemosyne, on the other hand, hearkens back to the mnemonic formulas of the Hipponion tablet and those influenced by it. The fact that the Rome tablet has elements of both the Thurii and Hipponion has intriguing implications, particularly given the tablets late date. It is entirely possible that the Thurii and Hipponion tablets are related to the same cult, and that different portions of the initiation ritual were emphasized in each area for the lamellae. It is also possible that an orpheotelestai somehow had access to the books from both traditions, and melded the two traditions together when creating the Rome tablet. At this point it is a matter of conjecture.

The theory that the narrative contained in the lamellae was part of an initiation ritual bears some further exploration. In the Eleusinian Mysteries, for example, many scholars believe part of the initiation rites included a ritual drama. The fact that many of the lamellae, particularly those that used the Hipponion tablet as a model, contain dialogues, support the theory that the *orpheotelestai* in this region utilized ritual drama in their initiation ceremonies. These lamellae take the initiate on a journey in the underworld, instructing them to drink from the spring of Mnemosyne and providing dialogue between the initiate and the guardians of the spring:

*I am parched with thirst and I perish. But allow me to
 drink from the ever-flowing spring on the right, by the cypress.
 Who are you? Where are you from? I am a son of Earth and
 starry Heaven*

The formulaic phrases found in the lamellae are also located in other Orphic documents; this illustrates that the ideas contained within the lamellae were circulating throughout the Graeco-Roman world. The Derveni Papyrus, discovered in 1962, is an interesting counterpart to the gold lamellae. Both were found in a funerary context; the lamellae placed as epistomia with the deceased, and PDerveni placed upon the funeral pyre of one deceased man. The partially intact text is the oldest known papyrus in Greece. Based on the archaeological evidence, it dates to at least the late fourth century, if not earlier. There is some debate as to when the dactylic hexameters of PDerveni were actually composed, as well as why the papyrus ended up on the funeral pyre rather than inside the tomb with the deceased. Walbank proposed the notion that the deceased heirs utilized the text as flammable material on the pyre because they dismissed the text as not valuable, whereas Janko believes the text to be valuable to the deceased, and that is precisely why it was burned on the pyre (Tzifopoulos, "The Derveni Papyrus and the Bacchic-Orphic Epistomia", 2010). While Janko's theory is fascinating, it contradicts other burial practices that occur during the time period, particularly when compared with the lamellae, as Tzifopoulos rightly noted. The initiates who were buried with the lamellae took great care to make sure to make certain their epistomia were not damaged, even in cases of cremation burials, whereas in the Derveni burial, it was merely by chance that any of the text survived.

The Derveni Papyrus contains a commentary to an Orphic poem that dates to as early as the sixth century BCE. There are a number of fascinating claims that the author of the papyrus makes, revealing that he was well-versed in the literature of ancient Greece and had a sophisticated knowledge of theology; for instance, he not only stated that Orpheus and Epimenides were theologians (which was common belief during that period), but also that Homer and Heraclitus performed similar functions. The text of PDerveni itself contains formulaic language, which in itself draws a parallel to those of the lamellae. However, the use of one phrase in particular stands out, as Tzifopoulos points out. In column XIII line four, the word *ekthore* ('sprang'/'leapt') is later followed more strongly by various forms of the related word *thornumi* in column XXI, which Tzifopoulos believes is related to the obscure verb *throsko* ('leap') (Tzifopoulos, "The Derveni Papyrus and the Bacchic-Orphic Epistomia", 2010). If these verbs are all related, it is not by mere coincidence, as the occurrence of *throsko* in other archaic poems is rare; however, it occurs in four of the lamellae: two from Pelinna, and two from Thuri.

Sistakou offers additional comparisons between PDerveni and the lamellae. In analyzing the content of PDerveni to find the author's voice and strategies, she discovered references to rituals that were performed to the dead, and references to an oracle and, perhaps, a tomb (Sistakou, 2010). The juxtaposition of oracle and tomb is quite significant when considering the Orphic cosmogonies, as according to these, Dionysus had a tomb at the oracle at Delphi. It is unclear

whether the ritual being enacted is an initiation or burial ritual, which again ties in with the lamellae, as it is currently believed that the lamellae contain part of a passage that was recited during an initiation. This is accomplished through the libations to Zeus, the Eumenids and daimons, as if in retribution, and the sacrifice of birds, representing Phanes/Protogonos, one of the original creators of the universe in Orphic theogony as mentioned in PDerveni.

A common theme in PDerveni is that of the elements, particularly that of fire and its role in purification. This ties it in with several of the lamellae, particularly those at Thurii. Thurii 3, for example, contains the enigmatic line:

But Fate subdued me, and all the other immortal gods and the star-flunged thunderbolt.
(Thurii 3, line 4)

The reference to the thunderbolt is significant. Gabor Betegh, for example, notes the validity of other scholars' theories that the reference indicates that the deceased died from a strike of lightning (Betegh, 2004). Death via lightning represents divine intervention of some sort. In mythology, heroes such as Heracles were carried to Mount Olympus via lightning, as Heracles' funeral pyre was stuck by lightning once it was lit. Thurii 3 is the only lamella to mention thunderbolts, lending validity to this theory, even though archaeological evidence at the grave site is lacking.

The focus on the elements, particularly those of fire and air, is found not only in PDerveni, but also in Thurii 2, which was wrapped around Thurii 1. Thurii 2 is badly damaged, but appears to be a prayer of some sort, invoking many Orphic deities and elements. Bernabe and Jimenez San Cristobal believe the text to be coded in some way significant to initiates only, similar to a word puzzle. Zuntz believes it to be a prayer by Kore to her mother Demeter (Betegh, 2004). What is significant about the text is the focus on air and fire throughout the garbled words; this focus on air and fire even extends to areas which normally would not make sense in Greek myth, such as the earth goddess Demeter being equated with fire and the sea god Okeanos being equated with air.

A very badly damaged papyrus from Gurob, dating to the mid-3rd century BCE, appears to be a ritual out of one of the itinerant *orpheotelestai's* holy books. While the text is fragmentary, there are a few glimmering sparks that indicate that the ideas contained within the lamellae travelled to the composer of the Gurob Papyrus. Line 10, for instance, mentions both a ram and a he-goat; a ram was mentioned in several of the "falling into milk" lamellae, while the he-goat could be a reference to a satyr. Line 20, furthermore, states, "you having parched....," which could be completed "you having parched with thirst," thus a reference to the "son of earth and starry sky" lamellae as found in Crete and Magna Graecia. This is, unfortunately, up to conjecture, as the text is so badly damaged. Several items are listed at the end of the papyrus, which might have been used in a ritual context, representing the toys that the Titans used to lure the infant Dionysus away: cone/spinning top, knuckle-bones, bull-roarer, and mirror (Levaniouk, 2007). The significance of the toys is picked up by later authors, including the Christian authors Clement and

Arnobius. Levaniouk believes, by studying texts like the Gurob Papyrus and other texts, that these toys were used in a ritual that initiates took home with them, holding a sacred spot on their home altars. Indeed, Walsh holds the significance of treating religious icons and artifacts as documents (Walsh, 2012). In this regard the Gurob Papyrus illustrates that those who utilized the toys and those who utilized the lamellae held similar beliefs in regards to the power of ritual objects, particularly when compared with the mainstream Greek religious system of public sacrifice and feasting.

The fact that the Gurob Papyrus was found in Hellenistic Egypt illustrates just how far the *orpheotelestai* actually travelled. This is further illustrated by the Edict of Ptolemy IV Philopator in the late third century BCE, which called for priests of Dionysus to turn in their holy books to the capital, indicating from whom they received their tradition 'to the third generation' (Zuntz, 1950). Some authors, including Zuntz, draw parallels between the Edict and Roman laws such as the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus* of 186 BCE, seeing the Edict as a means of controlling Bacchic worship in the area. While there are indeed some similarities between the two legal decrees, there are a number of distinctions that must be kept in mind. First, Ptolemy IV Philopator was an avid worshipper of Dionysus; while his intention for issuing such a decree is ultimately unknown, it was likely for reasons very different from the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*. Ptolemy, as a devotee of Dionysus, would more than likely have been seeking to legitimize the worship of Dionysus, weeding out the charlatans as described by Plato in the *Republic*. The *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*, conversely, sought to completely suppress the group worship of Bacchus/Dionysus in Rome and the surrounding areas. In addition, the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus* sought to control the worship of Bacchus in ecstatic groups, whereas the Edict of Ptolemy was issued for the *orpheotelestai*, as indicated by the reference to the holy books.

The texts that have been classified as Orphic are a fascinating aspect of Greek religion. They illustrate a rich and varied tradition that is spread throughout the Mediterranean, adapting and commingling with local customs where needed. This variation is what has made it so difficult to study; however, the bricoleur theory allows for the regional variation while acknowledging that there was a core set of ideas. There are a number of formulaic phrases and ideas contained within the Orphic texts that have been shared throughout various texts across regions and centuries, indicating the tradition as a whole had a sort of loose cohesiveness.

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