

# Orphism, Mystery Cults, and Pythagoreanism

Gent2

Stephanie Spoto

# Orphic and Dionysian Religions

- A set of religious beliefs and practices from the Hellenistic world of ancient Greece
- Reverence for Orpheus, Dionysius, and Persephone (all who experienced journeys to the underworld and returns)
- Perhaps a later reform of the earlier Dionysius religion
  - Involving a reinterpretation of the myth of Dionysius
- The details of ritual and practice reserved for the initiated
  - Many details of the cult and their beliefs/practices were lost with the decline of Greco-Roman Polytheism
  - Most modern knowledge derived from second or third hand accounts and cross-cultural studies.

# Origins of Orphism

- Named after legendary hero-poet Orpheus – who originated the Dionysian mysteries
- In the beginning, Orpheus more connected to Apollo than Dionysius
  - Said to be the son of Apollo – during his last days he devoted himself exclusively to Apollo's worship
- Poetry with Orphic beliefs traced back to 6th-5th century BCE
  - There is also some graffiti that refers to the "Orphics"
- Beliefs and practices most certainly predate this period
- Orphism is mentioned or described by Herodotus, Euripides, and Plato
- Plato mentions the Orphic-initiators (Ὀρφεοτελεσταί)
  - However, it is unclear how closely the "Orphic" literature of the time relates to the rituals.

# Dionysian Religion

- Referred to the Dionysian Mysteries – these were rituals which often used intoxicants as part of ritual
  - Also, would use trance-inducing techniques such as dance and music
  - Meant to remove social constraints
  - Liberates the adherent to a natural state before civilization
- Was an equalizer of peoples – everyone from the most privileged to the most marginalized (women, slaves, outlaws, etc.) could come together to participate.
- In final phase of ritual, shifted from chthonic emphasis (underworld) to transcendental and mystic

# The dual nature of body and soul

- Central myth of Orphism is the suffering and death of Dionysius at the hands of the Titans
  - Infant Dionysius is killed and dismembered by the Titans
  - Zeus strikes the Titans with a thunderbolt in retribution, turns them to ash
  - Humanity is born from these ashes
- This myth describes humankind has having a dualistic nature:
  - Body (σῶμα): inherited from the Titans
  - Soul (ψυχή): inherited from Dionysius
- Goal of Orphism is to achieve salvation from material existence
  - Had to be initiated into Dionysian mysteries and become ritually purified
  - Through reliving the suffering of Dionysius, belief that they would overcome the cycle of life and death and life permanently alongside Orpheus and other heroes in the afterlife.
- The uninitiated would be reincarnated for all eternity

## Orphism and Pythagoreanism

- Parallels to Pythagoreanism in beliefs and practices
- Traditions sometimes hold that Pythagoras authored some of the earlier Orphic works himself – or was an initiate of Orphism
- How they relate to each other or influenced each other is controversial in the field
  - Some believe that they began as separate traditions but became conflated and muddled due to some similarities
  - Some argue that they have a single origin and should be considered together
- Belief that Pythagoreanism was a direct descendent of Orphism existed by late antiquity
- Proclus, and other Neoplatonic philosophers took the Orphic beginnings of Pythagoreanism as given:
  - "all that Orpheus transmitted through secret discourses connected to the mysteries, Pythagoras learnt thoroughly when he completed the initiation at Libethra in Thrace, and Aglaophamus, the initiator, revealed to him the wisdom about the gods that Orpheus acquired from his mother Calliope."

## Russell on the relation between Orphism and Pythagoreanism

Bertrand Russell (1947) noted:

*The Orphics were an ascetic sect; wine, to them, was only a symbol, as, later, in the Christian sacrament. The intoxication that they sought was that of "enthusiasm," of union with the god. They believed themselves, in this way, to acquire mystic knowledge not obtainable by ordinary means. This mystical element entered into Greek philosophy with Pythagoras, who was a reformer of Orphism as Orpheus was a reformer of the religion of Dionysus. From Pythagoras Orphic elements entered into the philosophy of Plato, and from Plato into most later philosophy that was in any degree religious.*

# Questioning the authenticity of Orphism

- Earlier writings concerning this relationship are less certain
- Writers closer to Pythagoras's own time didn't communicate any initiation to Orphism
  - When they spoke of the figure of Orpheus, it was as a mythological figure
  - However, even writers of this time (5th-4th centuries) noticed a strong similarities between the two philosophies
- Rather than being an initiate into Orphism, some contemporaries claimed that Pythagoras himself wrote the Orphic texts.
- Ion of Chios argued that the poetry that Pythagoras claims was written by Orpheus was actually written by Pythagoras
- Epigenes (*On Works Attributed to Orpheus*, 4th century BCE): claimed that the authorship of many early Orphic poems were notable Pythagoreans.
- Cicero and Aristotle also claimed that Orpheus never existed



# Reincarnation

- Reincarnation (or metempsychosis) beliefs in both traditions (Orphism and Pythagoreanism)
- Some differences:
  - Orphism: a cycle of reincarnation where bodies are trapped, stuck in cycle of grievous embodiments – can be escaped through rites
  - Pythagoreanism: eternal, value neutral metempsychosis – personal actions/decisions/rites cannot impact this fate
- Neoplatonists: Orphic philosophy/beliefs via Pythagoreanism is the core of the original Greek philosophical and religious tradition.
  - It then became a marginal/fringe movement
  - Mythology, ritual practice become thought of as foreign
  - Believed to be bringing in alien components from Egypt (4th/5th century BCE)

# The Orphic Theogonies

- Orphic Theogonies: composed poetical genealogical works (reminiscent of Hesiod's *Theogony*)
- Some scholars have noted that the Orphic theogonies are symbolically close to West Asian models.
- Story:
  - Zagreus (Dionysius's first incarnation) is the son of Zeus and Persephone -- Zeus names Zagreus as his heir and this infuriates Hera
  - Hera gets the Titans to murder Zagreus – Zagreus is tricked with a mirror and some toys by the Titans – they shred him into pieces and then devour him
  - His heart is saved by Athena, who tells Zeus about the murder – this is Zeus's motivation for his destruction of the Titans
  - The ash from this destruction is the ash from which humankind is born – this ash contains the bodies of Titans and Zagreus (the soul of humankind is Zagreus/Dionysius) – but the Titan part holds us in bondage

# The Wheel of Rebirth

- The Wheel of Rebirth: the human soul returns to a body ten times
- Apollo carefully collects the dismembered limbs of Zagreus and buries them in his sacred land, Delphi
  - Later versions: this burying of Zagreus by Apollo leads to his reincarnation as Dionysus (this is why Apollo has the title *Dionysiodotes*, bestower of Dionysus)
- Why Apollo?
  - Apollo represents the returning of the Encosmic Soul into unification

# Reunification of Encosmic Soul

Dwayne A. Meisner, *Orphic Tradition and the Birth of the Gods*,  
2018

"More precisely, the Titans represent the division that occurs as the Forms proceed from Soul into matter, and Apollo represents the unification that occurs as Nature reverts back toward Soul. Having been dismembered and brought back to life, Dionysus represents the center-point between these two, where the processes of proceeding and reversion intersect. While Dionysus himself represents indivisible Encosmic Intellect, Apollo represents divisible Encosmic Soul. In this way, Dionysus is the center-point between Zeus and the Many" (p. 269)