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To Descend into Oblivion: The Landscape of the Underworld, Identity, and Escape from Reincarnation in the Orphic Tablets

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Abstract

The inscribed golden leaves known as the Orphic tablets contain remarkably clear and concrete instructions for its owners, to be carried out after death in the Underworld. While the tablets have been studied extensively from a literary perspective and in the context of the experiences of the living, their role in describing a physical geography of the afterlife is woefully understudied. This paper shows that the tablets' owners saw the Greek Underworld as a real place, in which certain physical actions were to be carried out in order to avoid the oblivion of death and rebirth. It connects Orphic views on life, death, memory, and identity to the geography of the Orphic conception of the Underworld, and shows that these themes were intricately linked after death. Careful narrative analysis of the texts contained in the tablets shows that physical manipulation of the mythical landscape of the Underworld allowed one to retain their identity instead of being lost to post-mortem oblivion. In line with the Orphic belief system, this was crucial to the escape of the cycle of death and rebirth caused by the events of Orphism's core narrative, the Zagreus myth. This paper thus highlights the perceived reality and urgency of the Underworld for the ancient Greeks, instead of relegating it to the realm of myths which only hold relevance in the context of pre-mortem experiences.

[Keywords]: Orphism, lamellae, underworld, identity, landscape

1. Introduction

Sacred landscapes come in many forms. Most of them will instantly seem familiar: temples, groves, shrines, caves, processional routes, et cetera.

However, sacred landscapes do not necessarily have to be physical. Mythical landscapes can hold the same sacrality and be equally important and influential, even if they are not 'real' in a physical sense. One example of this is the Greek Underworld.

The Underworld is a mythical place that ordinary Greeks could not visit (although they obviously believed that they would do so after death), but it nonetheless has a clear landscape geography. This was expressed not only through communal myth like the stories of Persephone, Herakles, and Odysseus, but also in the Orphic tablets. These are 47 small golden *lamellae* (leaves) dating overwhelmingly to the fourth and third centuries BCE, with some outliers in both directions. Some measure only a few centimeters squared (the smallest being 3x1 cm), while larger specimens measured as much as 81x23 mm in the case of the so-called 'great tablet' from Thurii.¹ The tablets are inscribed with minuscule text, usually in dactylic hexameters. Such tablets have been found in diverse locations, ranging from Magna Graecia, Thessaly, and Macedon to Crete and Rome. They differ from other forms of tablets found in graves in both material and content: while tablets made of lead or other base metals are somewhat common, golden tablets are extremely rare. Additionally, lead tablets were typically curse tablets, added to the grave later in order to call down a curse on someone (not necessarily the deceased interred in the grave).² The Orphic tablets, meanwhile, were personal religious items belonging to the deceased.

The Orphic tablets were found in graves believed to belong to initiates of the Orphic cult. There has been considerable debate about whether the tablets are actually Orphic in nature, however. Most of this debate is due to the unclear nature of many ancient Greek (mystery) cults, like the overlap between Orphism, the Dionysiac mysteries, and the Eleusinian mystery cult.³ Expressions considered Orphic by some scholars may, for example, be interpreted as Dionysiac by others. Yet others see the tablets as Pythagorean. This is not the debate this paper aims to contribute to, however. Bernabé and San Cristobal have relatively recently made a compelling argument that the tablets are, in fact, Orphic, based on the sources themselves and a synthesis of scholarly views.⁴ Their reasoning on this question will be adopted in this paper, to allow us to move forward without getting stuck in the muddy ground of a debate this paper does not aim to advance. Instead, this paper aims to build on

¹ A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008), 2.

² Gager (1999).

³ For instance: G. Pugliese Carratelli (2003), 10; P. Kingsley (1995).

⁴ A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008), 179-205.

the work of Bernabé and San Cristobal by examining an aspect of the tablets left understudied: the role of and connections between identity, geography, and memory.

Orphic beliefs are diverse and relatively ill-defined. Many works attributed to Orpheus exist, which in reality were probably written by an assortment of authors.⁵ The Orphic beliefs relevant to this paper are founded in a version of the myth of Dionysus: the Zagreus myth. In short, according to Orphics, newborn Dionysus (son of Zeus and Persephone) was kidnapped, dismembered, and eaten by the Titans, who were jealous of the child. The remaining, uneaten parts of Dionysus were gathered by his kindred deities, after which Zeus breathed new life into him. Zeus then proceeded to punish the Titans for the murder, destroying them with thunderbolts. From the ashes of the Titans, the human race emerged. Since the Titans had parts of divine Dionysus in their stomachs, human nature is twofold: part mortal and wicked – the Titanic part – and part immortal and divine, from the remains of Dionysus.⁶ Thus, every human being carries within them a form of ‘original sin,’ along with the divine. In order to have a happy afterlife, the sinful Titanic part would have to be tamed and shed. Until one managed to do so, they would be punished. This punishment would consist of bearing the pain and toil of mortal life over and over. After one’s physical death, the soul would eventually be reincarnated with no knowledge of its previous lives, to suffer once more.⁷

Orphic initiates (Orphism being a mystery cult) would shed their Titanic nature by cultivating the divine during their life. They attempted to purify themselves by living morally and not giving in to the vices they longed for due to their Titanic nature. In doing so, they fulfilled the prerequisites to escape the cycle of reincarnation and punishment.⁸ The actual escape was achieved in a lengthy ritual which was to take place after death, in the journey into the Underworld described in the Orphic tablets.

The Orphic tablets are in general very well-studied. Alberto Bernabé Pajares and Ana Isabel Jiménez San Cristóbal, Fritz Graf, Sarah Iles Johnston, and Günther Zuntz have all published comprehensive inventories of the tablets, with Bernabé and San Cristobal’s inventory being particularly complete and

⁵ R.G. Edmonds (2011), 73-78.

⁶ Diod. Sic. 5.75.4. See also Anthi Chrysanthou’s excellent compilation of sources expressing this myth: A. Chrysanthou (2020), 85-88.

⁷ A. Chrysanthou (2020), 85-112.

⁸ R.G. Edmonds (2011), 195-295.

well-supported.⁹ Edward Jenner, Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui, and many others have studied the tablets in a literary, linguistic, or material perspective.¹⁰ Most are interested in the question if, and if so how, the tablets relate to Orphism. This paper's views on this issue have been made clear above. Meanwhile, Radcliffe Edmonds published a study in which he traces and interprets the journey through the Underworld described in the tablets, and touches on the issue of identity. He does so, however, in the context of how the tablets influenced the identity of the living – not the identity of the deceased.¹¹ This is equally true for studies specifically focusing on ancient identity: the dead are placed in the context of the identity of the living.¹²

While this is an interesting and useful perspective, it ignores what was for the ancient Greeks a very real prospect: the descent into the Underworld and the oblivion – thus, erasure of identity – that awaited them there. When the dead entered the Underworld, their memories became vague and distant, until they eventually turned into shades: imprints of their former selves stripped of agency and identity. The Orphic tablets show an attempt to prevent this through specific interactions with the landscape geography of the Underworld, rooted in a complicated belief system. Studies of the Underworld as such a sacred landscape are very rare and usually take a literary perspective.¹³ A study specifically tying geographical elements in the landscape of the Underworld to the preservation or erasure of identity is entirely absent, even though identity is a central element of the Orphic tablets' *raison d'être*.

This paper thus aims to test the hypothesis that identity was a central element in the journey described in the Orphic tablets, and that it was intricately linked to the initiates' conceptions of the geography of the Underworld. It will start by making a selection of Orphic tablets that describe the deceased's journey through the Underworld. Fourteen of these exist. The other 33 tablets contain mostly prayers, greetings, and so forth and are not directly relevant to the study at hand, nor do they contradict any of the conclusions this paper draws. The data gathered from the tablets will be used to construct an image of how those involved with the Orphic tablets saw identity and loss thereof after death, what could be done to prevent it, and how this tied into the mythical sacred landscape of the Underworld.

⁹ F. Graf and S. Iles Johnston (2013); G. Zuntz (1971); A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008).

¹⁰ E. Jenner (2014); M. H. de Jáuregui, A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal, et al. (2011).

¹¹ R.G. Edmonds (2004).

¹² For example: D. Demetriou (2012); K. Lomas (2004).

¹³ For example: K. Winter (2016), 122-147.

2. Identity and chthonic geography in the Orphic tablets

The tablets under investigation are tablets *FR 474* to *484a B.*¹⁴ These contain ‘roadmaps’ that provide specific instructions to the deceased for their journey through the Underworld. Also included are tablets *FR 493* and *493a B.*, which contain the passwords the deceased needed to complete their journey. These tablets date from the fourth to the second century BCE and were found in graves spread over a wide geographical area, ranging from Magna Graecia and Thessaly to the island of Crete.

1) *FR 474 – 477 B.*

The longest and most extant tablet from this group is *FR 474 B.*, found in Hipponion (modern Vibo Valentia in Calabria) and dating to ca. 400 BCE.¹⁵

Μναμοσύνας τόδε ἔργον· ἐπεὶ ἄν μέλλησι θανεῖσθαι
 εἰς Ἄϊδαο δόμους εὐήρεας, ἔστ’ ἐπὶ δεξιᾷ κρήνα,
 πᾶρ δ’ αὐτὰν ἑστακῶα λευκὰ κυπάρισσος·
 ἔνθα κατερχόμεναι ψυχὰὶ νεκῶων ψύχονται.
 ταύτας τᾶς κράνας μηδὲ σχεδὸν ἐγγύθεν ἔλθῃς. 5
 πρόσθεν δὲ εὐρήσεις τᾶς Μναμοσύνας ἀπὸ λίμνας
 ψυχρὸν ὕδωρ προρέον· φύλακες δὲ ἐπύπερθεν ἔασι.
 οἱ δὲ σε εἰρήσονται ἐνὶ φρασὶ πευκαλίμαισι
 ὅτ’ αἰ δὴ ἐξέρεις Ἄιδος σκότος ὄρφνηεντος.
 εἶπον· Ἐὐφροσύνη εἰμι καὶ Οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος· 10
 δίψαι δ’ εἰμ’ αὐτος καὶ ἀπόλλυμαι· ἀλλὰ δὸτ’ ὄκα
 ψυχρὸν ὕδωρ πίνεαι τῆς Μνημοσύνης ἀπὸ λίμνης.
 καὶ δὴ τοι ἐρέουσιν ἰσοχθονίω βασιλείαι·
 καὶ ἰσοχθονίω δώσουσι πιεῖν τᾶς Μναμοσύνας ἀπ[ὸ] λίμνας
 καὶ δὴ καὶ σὺ πῶν ὁδὸν ἔρχεαι ἄν τε καὶ ἄλλοι 15
 μύσται καὶ βάκχοι ἱερὰν στείχουσι κλεινοῖ.

FR 474 B.

This is the work of Mnemosyne. When he is on the point of dying toward the well-built abode of Hades, on the right there is a fountain

¹⁴ In this paper the tablets are referred to by the designations given to them by Bernabé Pajares in his influential inventory: A. Bernabé Pajares (2004-2007).

¹⁵ G. Pugliese Carratelli (1974), 108-126.

and near it, erect, a white cypress tree.
 There the souls, when they go down, refresh themselves.
 Don't come anywhere near this fountain! 5
 But further on you will find, from the lake of Mnemosyne,
 water freshly flowing. On its banks there are guardians.
 They will ask you, with sagacious discernment,
 why you are investigating the darkness of gloomy Hades.
 Say: "I am the son of Earth and starry Heaven; 10
 I am dry with thirst and dying. Give me, then, right away,
 fresh water to drink from the lake of Mnemosyne".
 And to be sure, they will consult with the subterranean queen,
 and they will give you water to drink from the lake of Mnemosyne,
 So that, once you have drunk, you too will go along the sacred way 15
 by which the other mystai and bacchoi advance, glorious.¹⁶

FR 475 B. & 476 B. (found in Entella, Sicily, and Petelia, Calabria respectively) are similar to the point of being near-identical to *FR 474 B.*¹⁷ They also date to roughly the same period: the early to middle fourth century BCE. These three tablets give a clear description of the steps the deceased must take upon arrival in the Underworld. The deceased's journey *to* the Underworld, which in most Greek myths involved the guidance of a *psychopompos* like Hermes, is not mentioned – the tablets' instructions start right after entering the Underworld.

The tablets are remarkably concrete. After a reference to the tablet being a work of *Mnemosyne* (the lake of memory, because what follows is something to be remembered), the tablet states that the fountain on the right by the white cypress tree (almost certainly *Lethe*, the fountain of forgetfulness),¹⁸ where the souls drink, must be avoided. Drinking from *Lethe* would make the memory loss plaguing the deceased permanent. Instead, the initiate must bear the thirst of the dead a while longer and only drink further on, from the lake of *Mnemosyne*. They will be allowed to do so after telling the lake's guardians an Orphic formula identifying the deceased as an initiate and therefore someone

¹⁶ Transcription and translation: A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008), 9-10; 245.

¹⁷ A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008), 10-11.

¹⁸ A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008), 29-30. The whiteness of the cypress is notable, as these trees are typically colored dark. According to Edmonds, this strengthens the tree's role as a bright landmark – albeit a treacherous one which lures in the non-initiated, as the initiate should not drink from *Lethe*. Edmonds (2011), 226-227.

who has lived a proper moral life (“I am the son of earth and starry heaven”).¹⁹ Drinking from the waters of *Mnemosyne* restores the deceased’s memories, where *Lethe* would have erased them permanently.²⁰ Having drunk from *Mnemosyne*, the deceased is free to join his fellow initiates on the sacred way to their final destination, which as we will see later is the sacred meadow.

The mention of a sacred way echoes the processional roads used in religious festivals all over the Greek world. This association is strengthened by the mention of the *bacchoi*. While *mystai* simply means ‘initiates’ and can refer to initiates of any mystery cult, *bacchoi* has a specific processional meaning tying into the mythology of Dionysus. The *bacchoi* were those initiates who are said to have followed Dionysus in his ecstatic, drunken procession – initiates of the Dionysiac or Orphic mystery cult who shared in Dionysus’ ecstasy.²¹ This line therefore links the Orphic initiates with initiates of other mystery cults (like the Eleusinian mysteries) while also setting them apart, all anchored in the familiar geography of the sacred way and the processions that took place on it.

This anchoring in geography is also visible in the tablet’s treatment of memory and the loss thereof. The forgetfulness and oblivion that would normally come with death is anchored in the unnamed fountain, which is almost certainly *Lethe*. Meanwhile, remembering, and therefore life, is anchored in the lake of *Mnemosyne*. These waters divide the initiated from the uninitiated, both by causing one group to forget and another to remember and by physically making them take different paths through the Underworld. One’s memory and destiny are connected through the geography of the Underworld, the proper knowledge of which is only imparted on Orphics through initiation into the cult and which is only useful in combination with the good morals of the initiate in life. This does not mean that the tablet describes an allegorical journey. The instructions are too concrete and too direct in addressing the initiate to contain merely an abstract message. Instead, they are specific instructions to actually be carried out in a concretely experienced afterlife. For the Greeks the Underworld was very real and itself imbued with symbolism

¹⁹ Earth refers to the titans in Tartaros, starry heaven refers to the divine – the two parts of human nature as expressed in the Zagreus myth. The initiate thus professes awareness of their dual nature. A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008), 39-46; R. G. Edmonds (2010), 98-121.

²⁰ As Orphism is predicated on a base state of endless reincarnation, the Orphic initiate has already lived many lives. However, logically, the memories of these were lost permanently when they drank from *Lethe* at the ends of their earlier, non-initiated lives. Thus, the memories restored by drinking from *Mnemosyne* would only be the initiate’s memories of their most recent life.

²¹ G. Graf and S.I. Johnston (2013), 120-121; A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2009), 46-60.

and allegories. The presence of those allegorical elements does not mean that the Underworld was any less real or physical, and neither were the instructions in the Orphic tablets.

Another tablet that is very similar to *FR 474 B.* is *FR 477 B.*, found in Pharsalos and dating to 350-330 BCE.²² However, one significant anomaly warrants it being treated separately.

Εὐρήσεις Αἶδαο δόμοις ἐνδέξια κρήνην,
 πὰρ δ' αὐτῆι λευκὴν ἑστηκυῖαν κυάρισσον·
 ταύτης τῆς κρήνης μηδὲ σχεδόθεν πελάσηισθα·
 πρόσσω δ' εὐρήσεις τὸ Μνημοσύνης ἀπὸ λίμνης
 ψυχρὸν ὕδωρ προρέον· φύλακες δ' ἐπίπερθεν ἕασιν· 5
 οἱ δέ σ' εἰρήσονται ὅ τι χρέος εἰσαφικάνεις·
 τοῖς δὲ σὺ εὖ μάλα πᾶσαν ἀληθείην καταλέξαι·
 εἰπεῖν· Ἴγης παῖς εἰμι καὶ Οὐρανοῦ ἀστειρόντοσ·
 Ἀστέριος ὄνομα· δίψηι δ' εἰμ' αὖτος· ἀλλὰ δότε μοι πῖν' ἀπὸ τῆς κρήνης'.

FR 477 B.

You will find in the mansion of Hades, on the right, a fountain
 and next to it, a white cypress erect.

Don't get anywhere near that fountain!

Further on you will find, from the lake of Mnemosyne,
 water freshly flowing. On its banks there are guardians 5
 who will ask you what necessity brings you to them.

And you will tell them absolutely all the truth;

say: "I am the son of Earth and starry Heaven.

My name is Asterius. I am dry with thirst; give me, then, to drink from the
 fountain".²³

Until the last line the tablet is simply a shortened version of *FR 474 – 476 B.* The last line, however, contains what appears at first sight to be a personal name, which is all but unheard of in these long-form tablets. However, further analysis reveals that 'Asterius' (*αστέριος*) is in fact an identifier for initiates in

²² N.M. Verdalis (1950-1951), 99.

²³ Transcription and translation: A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008), 11; 252.

the vein of ‘the son of Earth and starry heaven.’ ‘Asterios’ can be translated as ‘he of the stars,’ congruent with ‘the son of starry heaven.’ The absence of the other part of human nature in Orphism, the Titanic earthly part, probably refers to the initiate’s success in shedding that part of his nature, leaving only the divine, heavenly, *starry* part.

The only long-form tablet to truly contain a personal name is *FR 491 B*. This tablet, found in Rome and dating to ca. 260 CE,²⁴ refers to its wearer by her name: Caecilia Secundina. This tablet is in all aspects an outlier, however. It is much later than the rest of the corpus, geographically distant, and its text in many aspects a corruption of earlier tablets. Any analysis of the presence of a personal name in its text can therefore not be generalized to the corpus as a whole. The question of (the absence of) personal names in the tablets will be revisited later on.

2) *FR 478 – 484a B*.

The eight tablets numbered *FR 478 – 484a B*. are all extremely similar. *FR 478-483 B*. are all from Eleutherna and Milopotamus on Crete and date to the third century BCE.²⁵ *FR 484 B*. was found in Thessaly and dates to the fourth century BCE.²⁶ *FR 484a B*. is from Sfakaki, Crete, and dates to the second century BCE.²⁷ *FR 484 B*. has been chosen as the example for this section due to the intactness of its text.

Δίψαι αὖτος ἐγὼ κ'αὶ ἀπόλλυμαι· ἀλλὰ πίε μου
κράνας αἰειρῶ. ἐπὶ δεξιὰ λευκὴ κυπάρισσος.
τίς δ' ἐσί; πῶ δ' ἐσί; Γᾶς υἱός εἰμι καὶ Οὐρανοῦ ἄστερόεντος·
αὐτὰρ ἐμοὶ γένος οὐράνιον’.

FR 484 B.

“From thirst I am dry and am dying; give me, then, to drink
from the fountain of eternal flow. On the right, a white cypress”.

“Who are you? Where do you come from?”

“I am the son of Earth and starry Heaven.

²⁴ D. Comparetti (1903), 161-170.

²⁵ A. Joubin, (1893), 121-124; N.M. Verdelis (1958), 56-60.

²⁶ J. Breslin (1977).

²⁷ G.Z. Tzifopoulos (2010).

But my race is heavenly”²⁸

In these tablets the clarity of the instructions seen in previous examples suffers. All of the core elements still exist: drinking from the right fountain, the white cypress, and the formula to appease to guardians. However, they have been abbreviated to such a degree that one would need a substantial amount of preexisting knowledge to understand the specific instructions. This, combined with the generally later dating of these tablets, suggests that the text had become formulaic. Clearly, this was not just someone writing down their personal interpretation of Orphic beliefs. These beliefs and the texts associated with them must to some degree have been coordinated and unified among the initiates, suggesting a degree of organization. None of this is particularly new information, but it is worth pointing out that the tablets provide supporting evidence for organization among Orphic initiates.

3) *FR 493 and 493a B.*

The tablets treated so far do not provide clear information on the final destination of the initiates. They, at best, end with the deceased joining his fellow initiates on the sacred way. Where the sacred way leads remains unclear. However, *FR 493 & 493a B.* shed light on the last part of the journey through the Underworld. Both of these tablets are from Pherai in Thessaly. *FR 493 B.* dates to the fourth century BCE,²⁹ while *FR 493a B.* dates to either the fourth or the third century BCE.³⁰

σύμβολα· Ἀνδρικεπαιδόθυρσον· Ἀνδρικεπαιδόθυρσον· Βριμώ· Βριμώ·
εἴσιθι· ἱερὸν λειμῶνα· ἄποινος γὰρ ὁ μύστης.

FR 493 B.

Passwords: Andricepaedothyrsus. Andricepaedothyrsus. Brimo. Brimo.
Enter into the sacred meadow, since the initiate is free from punishment.³¹

²⁸ Transcription and translation: A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008), 12; 256.

²⁹ P. Chrysostomou (1991), 376.

³⁰ R. Parker and M. Stamatopoulou (2007), 1-32.

³¹ Transcription and translation: A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008), 151; 266.

This short tablet bluntly provides a set of passwords to the initiate's final destination: the sacred meadow. A sacred meadow as a form of heaven, or good afterlife, as opposed to the punishment of a hellish place like Tartaros is a common theme in ancient Greek mythology.³² Here, entering it is the apparent end goal of the initiation, the rituals, the lifestyle, and the choices associated with Orphism. The initiate is 'free from punishment,' having succeeded in shedding his Titanic nature and having escaped the punishment associated with reincarnation. Now, he is ready to receive his reward: immortality in the sacred meadow.

The passwords themselves, used to get into the meadow, are a repetition of two names. Andricepaedothyrsus is an amalgamation of two words: Ericepaeus, translatable as 'adult man-child' and a known epithet of Dionysus, and 'thyrsus,' which refers to Dionysus' iconic staff.³³ The second password, Brimo, is most likely a Pheraian epithet for Persephone.³⁴

πέμπε με πρὸς μυστῶν θιάσους· ἔχω ὄργια [Βάκχου
Δήμητρος Χθονίας <τε> τέλη καὶ Μητρος ὀρεί[ας.

FR 493a B.

Send me to the thiasoi of the initiates; I have the sacred symbola of Bacchus and the rites of Demeter Chthonia and the Mountain Mother.³⁵

In tablet FR 493a B. the passwords themselves are not explicitly mentioned. Instead, the tablet simply declares that its bearer knows these passwords (*symbola*). In general this tablet appears to have served less as a reminder to the initiate and more as an order to the guardians of the sacred meadow. In this case it makes sense to keep the passwords secret until the initiate is actually asked for them by the guardians. It is also likely that the passwords were used during life to identify oneself to fellow initiates.³⁶ This obviously required that

³² Tartaros appeared as early as Hesiod's *Theogony* and was further explained as a hellish place of punishment for the wicked by Plato in *Gorgias*. Plato additionally juxtaposes Tartaros with the Islands of the Blessed, a heavenly place for the good that is similar in function to the sacred meadow. Hes. *Theog.* 721-819; Pl. *Grg.* 523a-527e.

³³ R. Hard (2019), 172.

³⁴ A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008), 154-157.

³⁵ Transcription and translation: A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008), 151; 266.

³⁶ A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008), 152-154.

one was careful to keep the passwords secret from the non-initiated. Electing not to write them out on this tablet may have been for this reason.

The *thiasoi* mentioned in the first line of the tablet refers to the body of followers of Dionysus, which bore this name. In a more physical sense it also refers to the place where Dionysus' followers gathered during Orphic/Dionysiac rituals and festivals, as well as the religious legal entity the initiates belonged to.³⁷ Taking into account the mention of a sacred way in *FR* 474 B. and the sacred meadow in *FR* 493 B., it is clear that the *thiasoi* here refers to the final destination of the initiates, at the end of the sacred way: the sacred meadow.

The choice of deities in this tablet is somewhat puzzling. The chief Orphic deities, and those usually mentioned in the other tablets, are Dionysus and Persephone, with some references to Hades as well. Demeter Chthonia and the deity referred to as the Mountain Mother are much less common. They are, however, related to Orphism in other contexts. Pausanias links Demeter Chthonia to Orphism when describing the adoption of the deity's cult by the Lacedaemonians,³⁸ while the Mountain Mother is mentioned in an Orphic context by Euripides in his fragmentary *Cretans*,³⁹ as well as in one of the Orphic Hymns.⁴⁰ The Mountain Mother is usually understood to be synonymous to Rhea or Cybele.⁴¹

4) Geography, memory, and identity in the Greek Underworld

Together, the tablets analyzed above allow us to reconstruct the Orphic journey through the Underworld, at least as it is expressed in the Orphic tablets. The journey starts upon entering the Underworld. There, the initiate is confronted with a fountain by a white cypress tree, usually on the right.⁴² This is where the non-initiates quench the thirst of the dead, but the initiate, armed with the secret knowledge of the cult, is warned against doing so. Instead, they should move on and find a different water, usually a lake: *Mnemosyne*. Here they will be confronted by guardians who ask what they are doing. In response, the initiate utters a formula stating that they are a son of earth and starry heaven,

³⁷ C. Isler-Kerényi (2009), 64; M.N. Tod (1906/07), 328-338.

³⁸ Paus. 3.14.5.

³⁹ Eur. *Cret. fr.* 472.13.

⁴⁰ *Hymn. Orph.* 35.

⁴¹ G. Graf and S.I. Johnston (2013), 155; A. Bernabé Pajares and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008), 159-160.

⁴² The only exception is *FR* 476 B., in which the fountain of *Lethe* is on the left.

belong to a divine race, or something to that effect, and that they therefore should be allowed to drink from *Mnemosyne*. The guardians, perhaps after conferring with the ‘subterranean queen’ (Persephone), allow them to do so.

Having drank from *Mnemosyne* the initiate is free to go along the sacred way, the route taken by all initiates. This way leads to the Orphic *thiasoi* or sacred meadow. Here, the initiate confronts either another set of guardians or Persephone herself and utters the passwords. They will then be allowed to enter the meadow, where they will be allowed to remain forever, achieving a definitive, permanent death – which for the initiates equates to immortality.

The tablets analyzed so far show three distinct paths on which one can end up after death. The first, most common path, finds the deceased drinking from *Lethe* and losing all memories, all sense of self – one’s entire identity. After remaining in this oblivion as a shade for some undetermined amount of time, they are reincarnated into a fresh body, constructing a new, distinct identity. The cycle of punishment is thus continued.

A second, much less common destiny is that in which the deceased is repurposed in the Underworld. The process by which this occurs is unclear, but the idea that the guardians or demons mentioned in the tablets are souls of the deceased is common.⁴³ These souls, like the ones above, are stripped of their identity – presumably also by drinking from *Lethe*. Instead of reincarnating like the rest of the uninitiated, they are reduced to tools, serving as guardians of *Mnemosyne* and perhaps the sacred meadow. It is unclear if these souls eventually cease being guardians and reincarnate as well, or if they remain guardians forever. Either way, they are dead in the Orphic sense, lost to oblivion.

The final path is the one of the initiate. By drinking from *Mnemosyne* they retain their memories and thus their identities, and therefore cannot be reincarnated. Reincarnation requires a ‘clean slate,’ a *tabula rasa* of identity. The initiate has in life proven worthy of immortality by living a moral, ethical life, doing what they can to shed the Titanic part of their nature, and was rewarded with the secret knowledge required to make the correct choices in the Underworld. In death, they are therefore free from punishment and allowed to retain their identity. They enter a form of heaven, the sacred meadow, and will live out eternity there, free from the cycle of reincarnation and punishment.

A core, yet in scholarship habitually overlooked, element in all three paths is the ultimate fate of one’s identity. Memory and identity are intimately linked

⁴³ Mentioned, for instance, by Heraclitus: *ἐνθα δ' ἐόντι ἐπανίστασθαι καὶ φύλακας γίνεσθαι ἐγερτοὺς ζώντων καὶ νεκρῶν*. Heraclit. *DK B63*.

in the Orphic worldview. The tablets' very existence shows that one loses much of their memory upon death, yet their identity is not yet gone. Only when one drinks from *Lethe* is the memory loss permanent and pervasive, and only then does one's identity disappear. This is not just an Orphic notion: for instance, a first century BCE inscription from Caria in Asia Minor has a deceased woman console her widower: *οὐκ ἔπιον Ἀήθης Αἰδωνίδος ἔσχατον ἕδωρ* – 'I did not drink Hades' last waters of *Lethe*.'⁴⁴ This text implies that the woman still remembers her husband, even if she is physically dead, because she did not drink from *Lethe* and thus retains her memory and identity. The loss of identity and entrance into oblivion caused by *Lethe* is what death truly is to Orphic initiates. Therefore, a non-initiate has fully died in the process of reincarnating, because even though the soul reincarnates, its old identity is gone. Paradoxically, this means that immortality is achieved by staying (physically) dead, but retaining one's identity. If the guardians are souls of the deceased, they, in the Orphic sense, are also dead, since they have been stripped of their old identities.

The importance of identity raises the question why personal names are all but unheard of in the longer-form tablets.⁴⁵ A personal name is usually the keystone of personal identity, yet they are omitted in all long-form tablets with the exception of *FR* 491 B., a tablet which is an outlier within the corpus. This apparent discrepancy is rooted in Orphism's goals and associated conceptions of identity. The ultimate objective is escape from the cycle of reincarnation, and in doing so attaining immortality in the Underworld. This transcendence of mortality consequently involves a transcendence of time. A personal name, on the other hand, is tied to earthly life bound by time. By shedding one's Titanic, earthly nature one therefore also sheds their personal name, replacing it with a claim to divine heritage.⁴⁶ Thus, a deliberate absence of personal names in the tablets is fully in line with Orphic beliefs. In the same vein, Orphic initiates were known to renounce their *genos*, or family/lineage identity, due to its entanglement with mortality and time.⁴⁷ Renouncing temporal components of one's identity, like personal names or *genos*, allowed one to claim divine heritage, transcendence of time, and in turn immortality. This opened the way to *Mnemosyne* in the Underworld, allowing the initiate to retain the truly important parts of their identity.

Retention of identity after death is, according to the tablets, anchored in the

⁴⁴ IK Knidos 1, 303.

⁴⁵ In shorter tablets they are common, for example *FR* 496a-n B.

⁴⁶ R.G. Edmonds (2010), 113-114.

⁴⁷ D. Sabbatucci (1975), 35-47.

manipulation of geographical elements of the Underworld. The initiate's entire journey hinges on their decision to not drink from the first fountain, which would lead to loss of identity, but to move along and only drink from *Mnemosyne*. Concrete geography is a key feature of this group of tablets, which is remarkable considering the uncertainties surrounding the concept of landscape expressed in ancient Greek writing of the pre-Roman period.⁴⁸ The journey initiates undertake takes them not just along *Lethe* and *Mnemosyne*, but involves a sacred way and meadow exclusive to initiates. Again, this is not an allegory – the instructions are extremely concrete and clearly refer to a physical act to be performed by the deceased. The mythical landscape of the Underworld was real to these ancient Greeks, and it could be manipulated to achieve grand cosmic goals.

In turn, identity and geography are linked to morality and divinity. Divinity is achieved by possessing superior morality (the shedding of one's Titanic nature), which is expressed in the capability to retain one's identity after death, which is anchored in one's knowledge of how to manipulate the geography of the Underworld. This knowledge is expressed in the Orphic tablets analyzed here.

3. Conclusion

The tablets describe in remarkable detail what awaited the initiate upon arrival in the Underworld, and what they should and should not do to attain immortality. This crucial final step, after a life of initiation, ritual, and purification, hinged on the initiate's ability to manipulate the landscape of the Underworld in order to retain their identity. Identity and geography were inseparably linked – and by extension linked to immortality, morality, and divinity. The initiate's entire journey through the Underworld was anchored in geography even beyond the retention of identity by drinking from the right spring, which itself was found through geographical markers. Afterwards, they proceeded along a sacred way, familiar from religious festivals during life, to eventually join the *thiasoi* in the sacred meadow. To the initiates the journey was exceedingly physical – this was not an allegorical journey of the soul, but a real one, with physical geography and physical actions to take.

The worldview expressed in the Orphic tablets is a deep and complicated one, that contradicts mainstream ancient Greek views as often as it confirms

⁴⁸ A. Cohen (2009), 305-308.

them. Initiates put themselves in a special place among the (deceased) Greeks by deeply rooting their views in more conventional Greek mythology. This study thus supports the conclusions of Redcliffe Edmonds, who argues that Orphism was not a cult detached from conventional Greek mythology, but embedded in and carried by it.⁴⁹ Mainstream views about the inevitability of becoming a shade after death were coopted by the initiates to construct an alternative path that would lead them to a fate above and beyond that of regular Greeks. A central and overlooked aspect of how this was achieved was identity, and its link to the mythical landscape geography of the Underworld.

The analysis conducted in this paper does require some explicit qualification. While this paper has taken the position that the tablets are, in fact, Orphic, that does not mean that the results of this analysis are applicable to Orphism as a whole. While Orphism was most likely quite a large movement, relatively few Orphic tablets have been recovered, from a relatively limited number of geographical areas. While this could be explained by graverobbing – the tablets are made of valuable gold, after all – it is equally possible that such tablets simply were not very popular, even among Orphics. It is entirely within the realm of possibility – albeit unlikely – that the tablets espouse views that even within Orphism were radical and unusual. The number of tablets containing a roadmap is even smaller – in the low double digits. While the previous section has shown that the corpus is internally consistent, this is nonetheless a small sample size. Therefore, it is worth explicitly stating that the results of the analysis in this paper are limited to the corpus of Orphic tablets themselves. They do not necessarily apply to Orphism in general. Of course, they *might*, but to actually determine if this is the case further research taking a broader view of Orphism, in which the tablets are only one of multiple groups of sources, is required.

Taking these qualification into account, the stability and consistency across the corpus allows us to confidently state that the Orphic tablets espouse a strong link between identity and geography, creating a mechanism for achieving the ultimate Orphic goal: freedom from the cycle of reincarnation caused by the events of the Zagreus myth, and immortality in the sacred meadow of the Underworld made possible by permanent physical death. Once the initiate had done all they could in life, the linchpin of what they could do in death to attain this goal involved the retention of their identity by manipulating the geography of the Underworld. The initiate had to resist their impulse to drink from the nearest source of water, resist their impulse to do

⁴⁹ R.G. Edmonds (2013), 395-399.

what everyone else does, and resist their impulse to give up and forget. Instead, they had to physically pass *Lethe* and find an equally real *Mnemosyne* to retain their identity. That, and in the end *only* that, is what allowed them to walk the sacred way to the sacred meadow and the *thiasoi*.

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