Orpheus and Greek Religion

W.K.C. GUTHRIE

With a new foreword by Larry J. Alderink

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Italian devotee who hid his identity under the revered and ancient name? No less an authority than Aristotle lent his weight to the theory that Onomakritos was the author. It is when we bend our mind to problems of this sort that those two words of Ibykos, if they recur to us, may seem to have been flung across the abyss of two and a half millenniums simply as an ironic comment on the voracity of time and the secrets which have become lost to us in its passage. It is our task to see whether, in this matter of famous Orpheus, long and unnumbered time, as it hides what is apparent, may be persuaded to complete the circle of birth and bring things forth from their obscurity in due course.

CHAPTER II

WHAT IS MEANT BY ORPHISM?

The Nature of the Evidence

'Now all these events arose from the same cause, and a multitude of others besides, more wonderful even than these, but through length of time some of them have been suppressed altogether, and others have been told to us scattered, each one apart from the other.'—PLATO, *Politicus*, 269*b* (*referring to the stories of the age of Kronos*).

GREEK religion was a many-sided thing. To the mind of a studious age it appears rather to be a medley of religions, and as investigators we try to separate the threads and trace each one back to its own beginning. It is right and proper that we should. In the Greece of historic times, the most obvious division to make is that between Olympian and chthonian religions, the cults of the pure air about the tops of the sacred mountain with their accompanying characteristics of sanity, light-heartedness, frankness, and the cults of the earth and the regions beneath it, often marked by a darkness and impressiveness and mystical yearnings after a union between man and god. When we have noted this we can draw further distinctions of increasing complexity and subtlety, to which no limit is set save by the industry and perspicacity of the scholar himself.

The perception of these distinctions is a necessity for anyone who wants to understand the Greeks and their religion. Yet it may lead to error if certain precautions are not taken. It is inevitable that in discussion of the different varieties of religious belief and experience with which the Greek world presents us, the term 'religion' should frequently be applied to each one separately. We speak naturally of Olympian religion, chthonian religion, Dionysiac religion, and so forth. This usage by its familiarity may cause us to lose sight of a fact worth remembering, which is this. The detached observer speaks also of Christian religion and Moslem religion; but here he is not

alone. The people of whom he is speaking are equally conscious that they belong to different religious worlds. This consciousness is an important part of their religion itself, and they are ready to kill and be killed in the avowal of it. Both may claim Judaism as one of the ancestors of their faith, and the Mohammedan may grant Jesus a place among the prophets. They remain mutually exclusive, in the sense that it is impossible to imagine a Christian calling himself at the same time a Mohammedan, or a Mohammedan a Christian. It would be possible to write a good book about the nature, origin and diffusion of Islam with little or no reference to the Christians save as the enemies whose militant opposition retarded the progress of the faith. We are apt to imagine that we are dealing with differences as clearly marked as this whenever we distinguish between religion and religion, and at the same time to use those terms in describing phenomena about which the assumption would be quite unjustifiable. It would be unjustifiable in discussing the religions of classical Greek or Graeco-Roman paganism. Hence my appeal for caution. The term 'religions' I retain, for it is a useful one, and innocuous once we have made up our minds what we mean by it.

To us the differences between the worship of Olympian Zeus and the mysteries of Demeter may seem as great as those between any two religions of more modern times. Yet not only did they never lead to wars or persecutions, but it was perfectly possible for the same man to be a devout participant in both. More than this, Kore daughter of Demeter, in whose honour as well as her mother's the mysteries were held, had Zeus himself for father, and Zeus could be addressed as Chthonios as well as Olympios. A totally different god in reality, you may say. Fortunately there is no need to go into such troubled questions just now. Totally different he could not have been for the fifth-century Athenian, and the instance is only one out of many which might have served to illustrate the point that in speaking of this or that religion of ancient Greece we cannot draw the sharp distinctions which we might between this or that religion of the modern world. It is not a question of tolerance. A state of tolerance prevails over a large part of the civilized world to-day, but it has not obliterated the definite line which can be drawn between Christian, Moslem and Hindu. It is a question of actual unconsciousness in the mind of the worshipper that differences exist which seem plain and obvious to an outsider. A parallel can easily be seen within the Christian world itself. Its

differences have not all been unconscious, as the long history of persecutions bears witness. But there exist to-day, worshipping side by side in the same church and with apparent unanimity, people of very varying degrees of spirituality, mental powers and education, according to which they believe, this one in a kindly father-god, another in a righteous but despotic Jehovah, another in a being whose nature is simply man's own perfected and with whom complete spiritual union is the not impossible aim ; immortality is conceived now as an expedient of divine justice, with the torments of hell for the condemned, now with the torments rejected as unworthy of divinity, now as a realistic extension of the individual personality, now as an almost Neoplatonic state of union with the supreme spirit in which the survival of personality may be but dimly apprehended. Almost all the different shades of belief are to be found which in studying Greek religion we take such pains to separate, and the conception of God's relation to men may vary from one as external as Homer's to the purest forms of mysticism. Religion in the last resort is of the individual, and no two men's religions are exactly alike. Those of similar temperament will prefer to group themselves together, and in classical Greece there were many kinds of religion to reflect this tendency. Some of them were devoted to particular gods, making it easy to suppose at first sight that each god or set of gods stood for a different type of religion, here the Olympians, there Dionysos, and there Demeter and Kore. In fact, however, we find that representatives of opposing types of religion will invoke the same god in an entirely different spirit (the change may be marked by a change of epithet), and also that gods whom we had thought of as inspiring incompatible beliefs and aspirations are sometimes peacefully united in the same camp. Much confusion has been caused by attempts to discover a non-existent order and reason in matters whose explanation is simply the calm unconsciousness of incongruity which can be seen within the limits of any one denomination to-day.

What has all this to do with Orpheus ? For the present we may notice at least that Orpheus was regarded by the Greeks as the founder of a certain kind of religion, that much has been written on the Orphic religion, sometimes known more simply to-day as Orphism, and that this therefore is a good place to remind ourselves that the term ' religion ' is only to be used in the limited sense here described

Orpheus, whatever may have been his origin, appears in history as a human prophet and teacher, whose doctrine was embodied in a collection of writings. He did not have a new and entirely distinct species of religion to offer, but a particular presentation or modification of religion. Those who found it congenial might take him for their prophet, live the Orphic life and call themselves Orphics. Their rites would become *Orphica*, and a new spirit would be infused into their religion; but they would not be called upon to worship a different god or to worship their own in a way that was always obviously different. Hence the ever-present difficulty of deciding whether this or that belief or practice can properly be called Orphic or not. We have reached that great stumbling-block of religious historians, the scantiness of direct evidence for Orphism. This is a misfortune which scholars have never ceased to deplore, but few of them have paused to consider seriously whether it might not in itself constitute some of the evidence for which they are seeking. Yet it is a remarkable phenomenon if Orphism is to be given the important position as a separate religion which is sometimes assigned to it.[1] If Orphism is of the nature I have suggested (a fact which admittedly awaits demonstration), the comparative rarity of any mention of it or of Orpheus in his capacity as founder of a religion becomes quite natural and is indeed only to be expected. Professor Boulanger, commenting on the complete absence of epigraphical testimony, has remarked (*Orphée*, p. 51) that although the worshippers of Kybele, of Attis, of Adonis, of Sabazios, of Dionysos, of the Eleusinian divinities had carved on their tombs an expression of their faith, nothing of the sort exists for Orphism. This need not surprise us. In the absence of any other evidence we cannot say that the dead worshippers of any of the deities he mentions had Orpheus for their prophet, but it is quite possible that some of them did. To assume that every worshipper of Dionysos was an Orphic is manifestly wrong, but it is equally untrue to say that none was. Only, when it comes to an inscription on a tomb, a man will be content to avow his faith in the deity he worships. He will not think it necessary to mention the name of the prophet from whose books he drew his faith and his code. One is tempted to remark, without claiming completeness for the parallel, that, however zealous a reader of the Old Testament a man may be, at his death he will prefer to commend himself to God; his debt to Moses or to Isaiah will probably go unacknowledged, at least on his tombstone. It can scarcely be objected that this is being too literal,

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having taken Orpheus for his lord, ascribes it to his 'paying honour to the vapourings of wordy volumes'. Plato mentions the poet several times and quotes from his writings. Some examples are: from the *Cratylus* (402*b*), 'Orpheus says somewhere' followed by two hexameter lines; from the *Philebos* (66*c*), 'As Orpheus says' followed by a single hexameter; from the *Laws* (2. 669*d*), 'Those whom Orpheus speaks of as having reached the years of pleasure', and the famous passage in the *Republic* (2. 364*e*) where the itinerant priests are spoken of as producing 'a mass of books of Orpheus and Musaios'. In the *Laws* again (8. 829*d*) the Hymns of Orpheus are mentioned, and in the *Ion* (536*b*) he is spoken of as one of the models of later hexameter poets.[2]

Eudemos, the pupil of Aristotle, is quoted by one of the Neoplatonists as having described a theology 'which he called that of Orpheus', and further testimony comes from the master himself. Aristotle indeed, introducing a spirit of scientific criticism which showed him to be before his time, ventured to doubt not only the authenticity of the poems but the existence of Orpheus himself. He attests none the less the existence of the literature and its common ascription in the fourth century. He twice refers a belief to the Orphic poems, but both times with the reservation 'so-called'. On one of these passages his Greek commentator Philoponos (sixth century A.D.) remarks: 'He says *so-called* because it is unlikely that the verses are by Orpheus, as he himself says in the *de Philosophia*' (a work now lost). Besides these two explicit references we shall find when the time comes that some of his more vague remarks about early writers on the gods must include Orpheus in their scope. It is only natural that when he himself felt doubtful about the authenticity of the poems he should avoid as far as possible committing himself by mentioning the reputed author by name more often than was necessary. It is part of Aristotle's method to gather in the opinions of all sorts of men as the raw material of his philosophy, and consequently *θεολόγοι*, the old religious poets, appear more than once in his works. In the *Metaphysics*, for example (A3, 983*b*27), he speaks of 'those who first in far off times, long before our own generation, wrote about the nature of the gods', and in passing we may note that the doctrine which he there ascribes to them is identical with that attributed by name to Orpheus in Plato's *Cratylus* (402*b*). It is worth giving serious consideration to anything which Aristotle has to say on our subject. The combination of fourth-century date with an acute critical mind and a lively interest in the matter in question

lends a peculiar value to any relevant pronouncement he may make. On the last of these qualifications, his interest and his appreciation of the importance to a philosopher which these ancient religious poems possess, there are clear indications in his work, and the point has been well brought out by Professor Jaeger in his book on Aristotle (English ed., Oxford, 1934, pp. 128 ff.). Other examples of their mention in the *Metaphysics* are 1000*a*9, 1071*b*27, 1091*a*34 and *b*8.[3]

Interesting are the glimpses which are to be seen of a tradition as old as the fifth century that there existed among the mountains of Thrace certain tablets(*sanides*) bearing writings of Orpheus, just as the Jews received their sacred law on tables of stone from Sinai. In the *Alcestis* of Euripides the chorus lament that they have found no remedy for the blows of Fate ; nothing avails, ' no charm on Thracian tablets which tuneful Orpheus carved out '. On this passage the scholiast quotes ' the natural philosopher Herakleides ' (Herakleides of Pontus, a contemporary of Plato) as stating that according to report there actually exist on mount Haimos certain writings of Orpheus on tablets.[4] This must surely recur to us when we read in the dialogue *Axiochos*, once attributed to Plato, that the lot of the soul in Hades was the subject of the writing on certain bronze tablets which two seers had brought to Delos from the land of the Hyperboreans (*Axiochos*, 371*a*).

Before we turn to glance at later testimony, an exception should be made to the exclusion of the sixth century from the present brief review, and room be given to a mention of Onomakritos. We first hear of this remarkable person in a passage of Herodotus (7. 6 = Kern, *test*. 182). Hipparchos, son of Peisistratos, had banished him from Athens on account of an insertion which he had thought fit to make with his own hand in an oracular saying of Musaios, who usually appears in tradition as the son or the pupil of Orpheus (ch. v, n. 2 below). Onomakritos had been entrusted with the redaction of his poems, but his manner of carrying out the task had caused a breach in what had been a very close association with the tyrant and his family. Finding, however, that during their exile at the Persian court he could be of considerable use to them owing to the very qualities which they had formerly deplored, the Peisistratids decided to forgive him, and we find him now with them at Susa helping to persuade the Great King to lead an expedition against Greece by the simple expedient of reciting to him all in the oracles that was favourable to such an enterprise and suppressing anything that boded failure.

For further information about Onomakritos we have to look to the writers of a later age, but there is the good authority of Philoponos for supposing that Aristotle himself believed the Orphic poems, in the form in which he knew them at least, to be the work of Onomakritos. Among writers of the first few centuries A.D., both Christian and pagan, the theory was well known. (Examples—Tatian, Eusebios, Suidas' Lexikon, Pausanias—are to be found in Kern, *testt.* 183 ff.) According to one of the accounts mentioned by Tzetzes (twelfth century), he was one of a commission of four appointed by Peisistratos for his recension of the Homeric poems, and there are stories that in this work too he was at his old game of interpolating lines of his own invention. (Kern, *testt.* 189, 190.) We shall meet him again.

The Alexandrian age is not rich in examples for our present purpose, but Apollonios in his epic of the Argonauts keeps up the tradition that Orpheus is not only a singer but a religious one, and that when he sings his subject is the gods and their relationships, and the origin of all things (*Arg.* I. 494 = *O.F.* 29). For a real outburst of interest in the content of the Orphic writings and quotations from their text we must wait until the beginning of the Christian era. It was a fashion among the Neoplatonist philosophers, who were active from the third century A.D. onwards, to quote copiously from the poems of Orpheus and thus lend to their doctrines the dignity which derives from a hoary antiquity. The Christian apologists too, who made it their business to denounce the beliefs of the pagans and show their religious practices to be either immoral or ridiculous, found in the same body of writings a target for their abuse. Examples from the works of these two schools are too numerous to make it desirable to quote for the sake of illustration, and they can be left until their proper place in the discussion.

No doubt Onomakritos was not the only person to be attracted by the idea of inserting new lines under an old name, and the poems used by the Neoplatonists can hardly be the same as those which Plato knew. To what extent they had been transformed is a problem by no means easy to decide. The possibilities of transformation in six or seven centuries are obvious : let us look for a moment to see whether there is any evidence on the side of conservatism. First of all there is the question, what's in a name ? There are two names in particular whose survival is relevant, that of Orpheus as the author of the

poems and the term *hieros logos* as the title of the chief of them. Both are of respectable antiquity. Of Orpheus we already know something. The term *hieros logos*, sacred story, is a common one which must have called up quite definite associations in a reader's mind. We meet it in Herodotus (2. 81 = Kern, *test.* 216) in conjunction with Orphic ritual, where, having commented on a certain practice as being in agreement with the Orphic, he adds, ' there is a *hieros logos* which is told about it '. Plato makes frequent use of the term and expresses great reverence for that which it describes. Moreover, the teachings which he takes from this storehouse correspond with what we know from other sources to be Orphic and are certainly nothing to do with, say, Homer or Hesiod. As an example out of many the 7th Letter will serve (335*a* = *O.F.* 10) : ' We must ever maintain a real belief in the ancient and sacred stories, which reveal that our soul is immortal, and has judges, and pays the utmost penalties whenever a man is rid of the body '. The possibility of new lines or whole poems being inserted under these venerable names depends on the view which was taken of such conduct at the time, as well as on the strength of the tradition and consequently of the old associations which the names called up. These are things which it is not time to measure yet, but it is a line of inquiry which may well bear fruit.

As more immediately convincing evidence that the Neoplatonic versions of the writings contain a large amount of older material we have one or two striking coincidences with quotations in Plato, which show beyond a doubt that both authors were excerpting from the same poems at the time.[5] Moreover, as has already been mentioned, Damaskios, a Neoplatonic philosopher of the sixth century, gives Eudemos as the authority for one of his quotations.

Finally we have to mention the existence of certain complete writings which have come down to us with the name of Orpheus attached to them. Of these the most important are an account of the voyage of the Argonauts, in which the singer himself plays the central part, and a collection of 87 hymns to various deities. The exact date of these writings is difficult to decide, but they cannot well have been put together in their present form before the beginning of the Christian era, and their date is probably to be set between the limits of the second and fourth centuries A.D.

We turn now to the second of the heads under which we are considering the material, and look to see what evidence there is

that the teachings of Orpheus affected the life of the people, how far he gave them a religious ritual, set tabus in their way, or otherwise determined their conduct. I would once more emphasize the fact that much of what has already been mentioned as Orphic literature may well be the visible basis of a genuine religion with its roots in the hearts of the people, although we have not yet considered it from that point of view: there are no *a priori* grounds for believing that a clearly marked division between literature and cult ever existed. To those new to the study of these subjects, this may seem a superfluous insistence on an obvious truth, but such a division has nevertheless been frequently taken for granted. Of course if it can be proved that in a certain instance a written work, religious in form, has actually no more than a purely literary significance, there is no more to be said; and I am not trying to deny that such instances occur. I only say that it is not an assumption which can be made offhand without an inquiry into the merits of the individual case.

The most ancient surviving testimony to Orphic practice is in Herodotus, and takes us back therefore to the fifth century B.C. It is a reference to the prejudice against introducing articles of wool into the temples or being buried in them. This is an Egyptian custom, says Herodotus, and 'in this they agree with the practices which are called Orphic and Bacchic, but are really Egyptian and Pythagorean'. He adds that there is a sacred story, or precept (*hieros logos*), on the subject. This prohibition is probably closely connected with the next that we hear of, to take the surviving evidence in its chronological order, that against the eating of animal flesh. Our earliest witnesses for this are first Euripides (*Hipp.* 952 f., quoted n. 2), and second Plato. In an important fragment of Euripides we have another mention of this form of abstention. It is not there attributed by name to the Orphics, but the parallel as well as other indications make it clear that the passage describes many traits of the Orphic religion (pp. 199 f. below). It is here that we find one of our earliest references to the god Zagreus, whom many have thought to deserve above all others the name of the Orphic god.

Orphism was a way of life, and an ascetic one. When Plato mentions as Orphic the custom of abstaining from animal flesh, he does so in the following words: (He is dividing the men of the past into two classes, those who both ate animals and sacrificed them, and those who held that to do either of these things was impious: of the latter) 'They abstained from

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term *grammaticus*, man of letters and learning, first gained a meaning. This ideal, foreign to the spirit of classical Greece, was inherited by men of all nationalities under the Roman Empire, along with so much of the Hellenistic world, and the study of religion had its place among the rest. It is an ideal not usually sought in a period remarkable at the same time for its creative originality, and in this the Alexandrian and Roman ages were not exceptional. In the sphere of religion this lack of originality had effects which do not at first sight seem consistent. In popular life it led to an artificial striving after new religions, not prompted by a true spiritual revival or inspired by a new religious genius, but often imported from other countries simply in a weary search for novelty. On the other hand, the need for a living religion, as well as reaction from the futility of those which were being popularly put forward as substitutes, drove some of the better spirits to an attitude of religious conservatism. This is the second of the intellectual features of the age that I have thought worth mentioning. As the best example of both I would cite the name of Plutarch.

Now it is true that Orphism does not seem to have escaped contamination from the waters of the ubiquitous Orontes. So little hope was there of this that one would be fairly safe in assuming, on the circumstantial evidence alone, that contamination had taken place. Yet the name persisted, and that could not have been without significance. It meant that certain beliefs and ceremonies, as well as certain poems, were being associated in some minds with what was believed to be one of the oldest religious traditions of Hellenism. Evidence for the extinction of the Orphic religion by the time of the Roman Empire is of the sort I have already mentioned (p. 10). Evidence for its continuance is not lacking. Cicero speaks of Orphic rites in the present tense (' a fourth Dionysos . . . in whose honour the Orphic rites are believed to be performed '), a fact which is brought home to us in a significant way by the arrangement of Kern, who prints side by side with the passage a quotation from Johannes Lydos (early sixth century) containing the same comment in exactly the same words, except that Lydos ends his sentence ' in whose honour the Orphic mysteries *used to be* performed '. There was still a trade in the charms and spells of Orpheus in the time of the patriarch Athanasios (early fourth century), who waxes indignant over the old women who ' for twenty obols or a glass of wine will disgorge a spell of Orpheus at you '. This is the sort of thing, he thunders, for which you spurn the Cross of salvation. It is

curiously parallel to Plato's denunciation of the wandering priests of his own day.[7]

With the spirit of study was born naturally the desire to travel as a means of acquiring education, and it was this which produced the work of Pausanias on the antiquities of Greece as they appeared to the curious traveller in his own day. His interest was by no means limited to the ancient buildings which he saw, and although sometimes inclined to be credulous he is a mine of information on subjects related to religious, and especially local, cult and ritual, both of his own and of previous ages. Orpheus, *Orphici* and *Orphica* all find scattered mention in his descriptions.

Finally, this outline summary would be inadequate without a reference to the possibility (I shall not call it more at present) that in the collection of hymns in hexameter verse which have come down to us under the name of Orpheus we have documents of genuine popular religion. The evidence for this, as well as the evidence for connecting them with any form of Orphism, belongs to a later stage of the inquiry.

FIG. 1.—FROM A BLACK-FIGURED VASE. LYRE-PLAYER AND INSCRIPTION *Χαῖρε 'Ορφεῦ*.

The foregoing summary has included no mention of the artistic tradition. This is because it is less prominent than the literary in a discussion of either the writings or the religion of Orpheus. In art the emphasis is rather on his own legend and character, although there are one or two monuments whose

possible religious significance has been the subject of much discussion. A brief description of our knowledge of Orpheus in art seemed therefore to form most naturally a separate division of the evidence.

He appears on a number of vase-paintings, of which the earliest is black-figure (fig. 1). We see him enchanting by his music, pursued by the enraged Maenads or prophesying in the form of a trunkless head after his death. Most famous are a series of vases from Italy, which show Orpheus playing his lyre in the world of the dead and the presence of the underworld deities. These have provoked much discussion, as possibly throwing light on the eschatological beliefs of the Orphics.

In sculpture he appears on a metope of the Treasury of the Sicyonians at Delphi, a work of the sixth century. He is

(*a*) (*b*) (*c*)

FIG. 2.

(*a*) Reverse of a Thracian coin of the beginning of the third century A.D.
(*b*) Reverse of a coin of Alexandria, time of Antoninus Pius.
(*c*) Reverse of a Thracian coin of the time of Gordianus Pius (238-244 A.D.).
The relief of pl. 3 may be compared.

standing with his lyre beside the ship *Argo*, on whose expedition legend says that he sailed. At his head his name is written in the form *Orphas*. There exist also copies of a relief of about 400 B.C. showing Orpheus taking farewell of Eurydice, whose right hand is held by Hermes, the guide of souls to the underworld. A statue of the first century B.C. found in Rome gives an early example in art of the animals gathered round Orpheus listening to his song (but cp. ch. iii, n. 14 below). Another example is to be found in our own country, on a Roman mosaic from the Isle of Wight (see frontispiece). According to R. Eisler (*Orpheus*, 1925, p. 97), the mirror reproduced in fig. 9, p. 66 is of the fifth century B.C. Numismatics has a contribution to make, for several cities in regions with which he was associated by legend chose his portrait as a device for their coins (fig. 2).

FIG. 3.—ORPHEUS PLAYING TO THE MUSES AND HERAKLES
From a wall-painting at Pompeii

Other extant artistic monuments to him are of much later date. He is to be found for example on wall-paintings at Pompeii (pl. I and fig. 3), and was a favourite subject of early Christian art. The common representation of him sitting playing his lyre surrounded by beasts wild and tame who are lulled into amity by his music suggests naturally the picture of the lion and the lamb lying down together, and he was also taken as the symbol of the Good Shepherd. This was for various reasons, some of which may interest us later. He is therefore a familiar figure in the paintings of the Catacombs. In speaking of Christian art one may mention the enigmatic seal in the Berlin Museum which has carved on it a human figure nailed to a cross (fig. 19). Above the cross are seven stars and a crescent moon, and around and beneath it the words *Orpheos Bakkikos*.

Besides the representations which we can still look at for ourselves, we are allowed to form an idea of others now perished, from the words of those who saw them. Pausanias is our most fruitful source of information. The extant examples of Greek painting, except vase-painting, are necessarily few, but an idea of the content of some of the better-known pictures is to be gained from descriptions in literature. Pausanias gives a detailed account of the most famous of all, the great fresco which Polygnotos in the fifth century painted on the walls of the *lesche* at Delphi. Here was the underworld depicted, and there was Orpheus. His attitude and surroundings are described by Pausanias with great precision of detail. From Pausanias we also hear of statues and images of Orpheus in various parts of Greece. Some were of the primitive form called *xoanon*. Plutarch also speaks of a *xoanon* of Orpheus in Macedonia which was made of cypress-wood.[8]

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

[1] The interesting line of thought suggested by the comment of E. Maass (*Orpheus*, pp. 69-71) on Eur. *Rhes.* 972, that the name of Orpheus is suppressed out of reverence (*übereifrige Ehrfurcht und Scheu*), could hardly be made to explain the rarity of *Orphica*, which are certainly not more frequently met with in ancient literature than Orpheus himself. Possible, but less likely than the explanation offered in the text, is the assumption of intentional secrecy due to persecution or ridicule (which are just arguable from such a passage as Eur. *Hipp.* 953 ff., quoted *infra*, n. 2) or to the esoteric (*ἀπόρρητον*) character of mystery-religions.

[2] Eur. *Hipp.* 952 ff. = Kern, *test.* 213: *ἤδη νυν αὔχει, καὶ δι' ἀψύχων βορᾶς σῖτ' ἐκκαπήλευ, Ὀρφέα τ' ἄνακτ' ἔχων βάκχευε, πολλῶν γραμμάτων τιμῶν καπνούς.*

Plato, *Crat.* 402*b* = *O.F.* 15: *λέγει δέ που καὶ Ὀ. ὅτι Ὠκέανος πρῶτος καλλίρροος ἦρξε γάμοιο, Ὅς ῥα κασιγνήτην ὁμομήτορα Τηθὺν ὄπυιεν.*

Phil. 66*c* = *O.F.* 14: *Ἕκτῃ δ' ἐν γενεᾷ, φησὶν Ὀ., καταπαύσατε κόσμον ἀοιδῆς.*

Laws 2. 669*d* = *O.F.* 11: *ὅσους φησὶν Ὀ. λαχεῖν ὥραν τῆς τέρψιος.*

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artistic), there are more to be expected within the limits of each division. It is not only the artist who adapts a tale to suit his own purposes. I have said that religion is of the individual, and each man will see in his prophet that which his own temperament leads him to expect from religion. Orpheus has played many parts in his time, according to the religious outlook of the author who was writing about him and according to whether that author happened to be his admirer or (like so many of the Christian apologists) his bitter enemy.

Besides the poets like Ovid, and besides the true believers, there is a third class of those who, like Strabo or Pausanias, were actuated by a spirit of honest inquiry. They must be given the credit that is due to good intentions at least.

We may say that Thrace was the home of Orpheus with the knowledge that we are speaking of him as he was conceived to be by every normal Greek or Roman from the fifth century B.C. onwards. One or two of our informants leave some doubt whether they thought his true origin was Thracian or Macedonian, for they speak of him as having been born or as living in the neighbourhood of Olympos ; but this, though an interesting detail, is a matter of little consequence to history. We may be content with the words of Karl Robert (*Heldensage*, i. p. 398) : ' Even if it is doubtful whether Thrace was his home, in any case he was localized there very early, and after that passed for a Thracian throughout the whole of antiquity '.[1]

His date was generally supposed in antiquity to lie in the heroic age, several generations before Homer ; and considering his reputation as the Father of Lays, it is not surprising that we find him represented by some of the Greek historians to be Homer's direct ancestor (Kern, *testt.* 7-9). Thus if we are asking ourselves what kind of knowledge the ancients themselves were likely to possess about his history, we should consider him, in respect of time, on a par with a figure like Herakles. This was an antiquity sufficiently remote to allow plenty of room for speculation. Herodotus even gives it as his opinion that Hesiod and Homer, living about 400 years before his own time, were the first to give the Greeks a theogony ; ' and the poets who are said to have lived before them are in my opinion later ' (Hdt. 2. 53 = Kern, *test.* 10). The reason for this opinion is probably to be found in the observation of a scholiast that no poem of the age of Homer's heroes has been preserved, ' and that too though Homer himself introduces poets, Phemios and Demodokos, and though Orpheus, Musaios and Linos are said to have lived before him. In spite of this

it is true that nothing earlier than Homer's poetry has been preserved to subsequent ages save a name. We have no poem earlier than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*'. (Kern, *test.* 11.) It may well have been a feeling that the poems current in his time under the name of Orpheus must be later than Homer, which gave Herodotus his belief that Orpheus himself was later, without leading him to the even more critical conclusion that the ancient Thracian had nothing to do with them at all.

Orpheus was the son of a Muse, Kalliope being the one most often mentioned as his mother. His father is sometimes said to be Apollo, more often Oiagros, a Thracian river-god.[2] (Authorities in Kern, *testt.* 22-26.) Of his birth there are no stories, except for a passing reference at the end of the Orphic *Argonautika* to the marriage of his mother with Oiagros having taken place in a cave in Thrace: 'Thence I made all speed to snowy Thrace, to the land of the Leibethrians, my own fatherland; and I entered the far-famed cave, where my mother conceived me on the bed of great-hearted Oiagros'.

We are told much about his character and influence, but little of the incidents of his life. The only stories of this kind are the death of Eurydice, and his journey to the shades to fetch her, the slender tradition of a sojourn in Egypt, the voyage of the Argonauts, and the various accounts of the events which led to his death and the miraculous events which followed it.

References to the expedition of Jason and the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece are frequent in Greek literature from Homer and Hesiod onwards.[3] Yet they remain isolated and unsatisfying references until the time of Pindar, who gives us the first attempt at a connected story and incidentally the first mention of Orpheus as a participant. A little earlier than Pindar (sixth century) is the sculptured representation of Orpheus with the Argo which is at Delphi (pl. 2). Apart from Pindar's lyrical account, which simply forms an episode in the body of a poem whose object is the glorification of a winner in the Pythian games, we have to rely largely on epic poems of a later date, the *Argonautika* of Apollonios Rhodios (*c.* 240 B.C.), Valerius Flaccus (*c.* A.D. 80) and Orpheus, the anonymous poem, perhaps as late as the fourth century A.D., which tells in the first person of the adventures of Orpheus with the heroes. These with occasional references in some of the later prose authors make up the sum of our authorities for his activities on the voyage.

We may ask ourselves briefly here of what sort these activities were, and in what ways he made himself of use to the expedition. This was something that exercised the minds of antiquity too. 'It is a question', says the scholiast, commenting on the introduction of Orpheus in Apollonios (Kern, *test.* 5), 'why a weakling like Orpheus sailed with the heroes. It was because Cheiron with his gift of prophecy told them that if they took Orpheus they would be able to pass the Sirens.' This passage gives an indication which side of his character comes to the fore in the narratives of the expedition. It is by the magic power of his song that he earns his place among the heroes. The uses of this gift are many and various. At the outset he is called on to assist in settling a quarrel by making the participants forget their wrath in listening to his singing (Ap. 1. 492 ff.). This story of Apollonios is left out by the Orphic *Argonautika*, which makes up for the omission by telling how Argo at first resisted all the efforts of the heroes to drag her into the water, until Jason signed to Orpheus to take up his lyre, and how she then slid into the sea of her own accord (*O.A.* 245 ff.). His actual office was that of *Keleustes*, singer of the chanties which gave the rowers their time; but his music, as we have seen, could do much more than that. There is one story that he calmed a stormy sea by its power (Philostratos, *Im.* 2. 15), and according to the Orphic account he successfully charmed the Clashing Rocks while the Argo passed through (*O.A.* 680 ff.). By the same power, when Kolchis was reached, he called down sleep upon the eyes of the dragon which guarded the Fleece (*O.A.* 991 ff.).

We find also that he was not only a musician, who could work magic by his music, but in all religious matters the leading spirit of the expedition. This is naturally most obvious in the Orphic version of the story. There we find him performing the inaugural sacrifice before the start, persuading the Argonauts to become initiated at Samothrace into the mysteries for which the island was famous, sacrificing after the accidental killing of King Kyzikos, performing purificatory rites at Malea on the return journey to free the heroes from the curse which King Aietes had laid upon them, and finally, his last act before returning to his home in Thrace, staying behind alone to offer sacrifice at Tainaron (believed to be one of the entrances to Hades) to the rulers of the world below. These are incidents of the Orphic version, but he is prominent in the other stories too. It is from others that we learn how he saved the company in a storm by praying to the Dioskuroi, gods of mariners, because

he was the only one who had been initiated in their mysteries (Diodoros, 4. 43. 1), how at lake Tritonis he bade them take the tripod of Apollo and offer it to the gods of the place if they wanted a safe return (Ap. Rhod. 4. 1547), and how when Jason dedicated the Argo at Corinth, it was Orpheus who composed the dedication-hymn (Dio. Chrys. 37. 15 = *O.F.* 290). Worth noticing too is the subject of the song which he sings in Apollonios to calm the spirits of the quarrellers, and that which in the Orphic *Argonautika* he sings in the home of the Centaur Cheiron. In both his song is of the origin of all things, of the birth of the world and the gods.

The story of the wife of Orpheus is bound up with his descent to the world of the dead, and so lets us see him in one of his most interesting and important aspects. The secrets of Hades were in his possession. He could tell his followers what the fate of their souls would be, and how they should behave to make it the best possible. He had shown himself capable of melting the hearts of the powers below, and might be expected to intercede again on their own behalf if they lived the pure life according to his precepts. That was the important thing. The reason which once took him there was secondary.

It is not so easy to decide whether it is secondary in time also. Our evidence for the beliefs about Orpheus before the sixth century is so scanty that it is difficult to judge with certainty whether he was originally an underworld spirit, to whom was later attached the romantic story of the descent in search of a lost wife, or a follower and imitator of Apollo, who took a nymph for wife and for whom the journey to Hades to fetch her was an adventure into unfamiliar surroundings, though he later became the patron of a religion which laid great stress on the life after death and so had this purely personal errand magnified into a reason for knowing all about the realms of the dead and possessing peculiar powers as adviser and intercessor. The latter view suggests a further possibility, that the whole story of the descent may have been attached to one who was originally a follower of Apollo only when he had been appropriated as founder by the aforementioned mystical sects. I hope to show later that this is the most reasonable supposition. There certainly seems to have been, in every age, enough of the Apolline in Orpheus to support the opinion that he belonged at first to the sunny, open-air religion of the Hellenes, a priest of Apollo bearing in himself many of the attributes of the god he served; it was later that he met

Dionysos and became the expounder of a sacramental religion and of the life hereafter. For the present we had better continue the legend.

In the description which Pausanias gives of the underworld scenes painted by Polygnotos, there is no mention of Eurydice being present to explain the situation (Paus. 10. 30. 6 = Kern, *test.* 69). It may be that in the eyes of some, his followers, Orpheus had an established position there, as it were in his own right. No particular errand had to be supposed to account for his presence, for by the time of Polygnotos he was certainly the patron of a religion in which all the emphasis was laid on eschatological dogma. If Pausanias is to be trusted (and there is no reason to doubt that, in describing things he had seen himself, he was a careful, as he was a detailed, recorder), this is our earliest piece of evidence for the presence of Orpheus among the dead. Yet it is of course late enough to make it certain that the conjugal motive, even if it were a later addition to the story, must have been added long before then. Its omission in the painting at Delphi cannot be due to its not having yet been invented. The famous relief of Orpheus and Eurydice (pl. 3) belongs at latest to the beginning of the fourth century. Both Euripides in the fifth century and Plato in the next speak of the descent of Orpheus to fetch his wife. Neither of them mentions her by name, and our next witness, the Alexandrian poet Hermesianax, calls her Agriope, a name (' wild-eyed ' or wild-voiced ') which suits well the Thracian nymph or Dryad whom he might naturally be supposed to have married (Kern, *test.* 61). Eurydice (' wide-ruling ') we first hear of in literature in the lament for Bion (first century B.C., Kern, *test.* 62), though one or two of the South Italian vases, which furnish after Hermesianax the next evidence of Orpheus in the underworld, put her in the picture with her name written beside her. Most of them, however, like Polygnotos, show an Orpheus who might well be supposed to be at home in the underworld, without the necessity of any conjugal errand to account for his presence.

After the Alexandrians the Romans, and it is only in them, in poets like Virgil and Ovid, that we get the theme elaborated into a complete and circumstantial story. So suddenly does this seem to happen, and so many are the Alexandrian models of later poets which are lost to us, that Gruppe (in Roscher's Lexicon, 3. 1159) supposes a particular poem of late Alexandrian date, now lost, to have fixed the legend in the form in which it burgeoned in Roman times.[4]

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Pausanias that he enticed their husbands away from them. Phanokles gives jealousy as the reason, and Ovid, as we noticed, follows him.

Among our earliest evidence for the legend of Orpheus' death are the representations of it on vase-paintings, which go back to the fifth century B.C.[8] On these Orpheus is never depicted as torn to pieces (it has been suggested (Robert, *Heldens*. I, p. 404, n. 3) that this may have been for artistic reasons), but the infuriated women are provided with a large assortment of weapons for the deed. Sometimes only one attacker is shown, sometimes more. Some are armed with spears, some with axes, some with stones; others have snatched up in haste more homely implements, sickles, pestles, even spits. This seems to imply the story of natural feminine wrath rather than of divine command, which is better suited by making him the victim in a Bacchic orgy. Virgil can combine the two with the freedom of a great poet, but Phanokles, who tells the first story, makes the women accomplish their vengeance with swords, not with the frenzied hands of Maenads. That the vase-painters had in mind, as motive for the murder, the enticement of the men and indifference to the feelings of their women is also shown by several examples where the theme of the murder is combined with another, that of Orpheus charming Thracian warriors with his lyre[9] (see figs. 4 and 5 and pl. 4).

FIG. 4.—THE DEATH OF ORPHEUS.
Red-figured vase.

The late mythographical writer to whom we owe the reference to Aeschylus' play about the death of Orpheus, adds that he was buried by the Muses, his mother and her sisters. Killed as he was in Thrace, they may have buried him near the spot or taken the remains to the neighbourhood of Mount

Olympos (see n. 1). Pausanias says that the tomb was near the town of Leibethra on Olympos. An oracle of Dionysos told the Leibethrians that if they allowed the bones of Orpheus to see the sun, the city would be destroyed ὑπὸ συός. Not

FIG. 5.—DESIGN ON A RED-FIGURED VASE IN NAPLES.
(*Upper half*) Women preparing to attack him.
(*Lower half*) Orpheus playing to Thracian men.

unnaturally, they made light of the idea, and one day it happened that the tomb was overturned and broken; whereupon the Σύς, one of the torrents of Olympos, flooded and washed away their city. After this the inhabitants of the neighbouring city of Dion gathered the bones and gave them fresh burial.

At Dion the tomb was shown as late as the time of Pausanias himself : ' If you leave Dion by the road towards the mountain, when you have gone twenty stades you see on your right a column with a stone urn set upon it. According to the local story, the urn contains the bones of Orpheus.' Pausanias, though he knows of the story that Orpheus was struck down by a thunderbolt, says that the tale told locally around Dion is that of the murderous women, whom the inhabitants believe to have carried out their crime in their own neighbourhood.[10] Pausanias was a traveller who visited the places he wrote about, so it is unlikely that the inscription on the tomb was in reality that quoted by Diogenes Laertios, which contains a reference to the thunderbolt of Zeus.[11] According to the account of Konon (first cent. B.C. ; Kern, *test.* 115, and cp. Harrison, *Prol.*[3] 467 ff.), Orpheus was buried by the Thracians.

More firmly established was the claim of the Lesbians to possess at least the most important parts of Orpheus and to have erected a shrine to him on their island. The form of the legend with which Milton shows himself familiar in *Lycidas* was also the most widely spread in antiquity. The head and * the lyre of Orpheus were thrown into the river Hebros, whence they floated across to Lesbos off the Asiatic coast, the head singing as it went. The Lesbians buried the head, as Phanokles says in his poem and also a third century writer of *paradoxa*, quoting the work of a local historian. Lucian tells us that the temple of Bakchos on the island in his time was said to have been built over the spot where the head was buried. The lyre, tradition said, had been dedicated in the temple of Apollo, ' where it was preserved for a long time '. Philostratos (third cent. A.D.) tells how the head attained wide fame as a giver of oracles. This in his time was only a tradition of the past. His story is that the prophesying was suppressed by Apollo himself. Finding that his privilege was being infringed, the god stood over the head as it spoke, and said, ' Cease from the things that are mine, for I have borne enough with thy singing ' (Phanokles = Kern, *test.* 77 ; Antigonos of Karystos Paradoxographos = *test.* 130 ; Lucian, *adv. indoct.* 109 ff. = *test.* 118 ; Philostratos, life of Apollonios, 4. 14 = *test.* 134 *fin.*). According to the account of Konon (p. 62 below), the head was found at the mouth of the river Meles, by Smyrna. This is interesting when we consider, as we shall later on, how many indications there are to direct the mind to Anatolia when thinking of things Orphic.

Ancient art provides a number of interesting illustrations of this myth. An Etruscan bronze mirror from a tomb at Chiusi

(Clusium), whose style points to its having been made at the end of the fourth century B.C., shows the head of Orpheus looking up from the ground with parted lips (fig. 6, and see the discussion in *Mon. d. Linc.* 30, 1925, 542 ff.). I mention this first because it is the only example with an inscription. Beside the head is written (to be read upside-down, and from right to left) *YPΦE*. A number of people stand around listening, of whom the seated youth on the right is taking down the oracles on tablets. (The Etruscan inscription on the tablets has unfortunately still to be deciphered.) With this is to be compared the design on a red-figured *Kylix* of the fifth century (fig. 7, from G. Minervini in *Bull. Arch. Nap.* 6 (1858), pl. 4). Again we have the head prophesying with parted lips, and a seated youth busily writing down its responses on tablets. On the right stands Apollo, and although his attitude has been variously interpreted, it is most naturally taken as referring to the story of his disapproval. Throwing out his hand with a commanding gesture, he is saying, 'Cease from the things that are mine!' The reverse of the vase shows the finding of Orpheus' lyre by two Lesbian women. Through the kindness of Professor Cook I am able to publish for the first time a vase in his possession which shows a similar scene (pl. 5). This is a red-figured *hydria*, noted by Professor Cook as Attic work of the last quarter of the fifth century. We see here the head in the same attitude of prophecy, with Apollo standing over it, his head wreathed with bay, and a lyre and a long bay-branch in his hands. The identification of the women on this vase is more difficult. She on the right is probably the Pythia, who by the delicate gesture of her right hand seems to sympathize with the hero and to deprecate the stern measures which Apollo intends to take. The woman on the left stands closely wrapped from head to foot in *chiton* and *himation*. Her hair falls about her shoulders and she wears a look of great distress. She might be the mother of Orpheus were it not that she does not correspond in type to any of the Muses. Perhaps Professor Cook is right in wanting to identify her as the ghost of Eurydice. There is no mythological point in her presence by the oracle on Lesbos, but another female figure was needed to complete the painter's pattern, and while he was thinking of Orpheus, Eurydice is the one who would most naturally come into his mind.

The oracle of the head of Orpheus is also the subject of the carvings on a number of ancient gems, which are discussed by A. Furtwängler in *Antike Gemmen*, vol. 3, 245 ff. That

FIG. 6.—BRONZE MIRROR FROM CHIUSI

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belief in his antiquity that, coupled with his reputation as a poet, it made some regard him as the inventor of writing, while others thought of him as so old that they could not believe he wrote down his own poems (Kern, *testt.* 123 [Alkidamas], 32 [Aelian]). So strong was the religious purpose of these writings that to a mind like Plato's it sometimes seemed wrong to class them with poetry at all. The passage where he draws this distinction is interesting. It is *Protagoras* 316*d* = Kern, *test.* 92 : 'In my opinion the didactic art is an ancient one, but those among the old writers who practised it were afraid of the odium of the name and so took refuge in a disguise. For this purpose some, like Homer, Hesiod and Simonides, used poetry, others religious rites and prophecies, I mean the school of Orpheus and Musaios.'

The influence of Orpheus was always on the side of civilisation and the arts of peace. In personal character he is never a hero in the modern sense. His outstanding quality is a gentleness amounting at times to softness. (Cp. pp. 28, 31, above.) From warlike attributes he is entirely free, differing in this from the archer-god whom in some other ways he so closely resembles. The atmosphere of calm which surrounds him differs strangely too from the normal habits of the wild mountain-god whose religion he adopted. Music may excite as well as soothe, but the cymbals and tympana of a Thracian or Phrygian orgy seem at first to have little to do with the sweet tones of Orpheus' lyre. The power of the lyre was to soften the hearts of warriors and turn their thoughts to peace, just as it could tame the wildest of the beasts. Not only animals but men gathered round to listen to the song. In the vase-paintings which show this scene, the expressions on the faces of the listeners leave no doubt of the effect which the music is having (pl. 6). This is reflected in the statement of a later author that Orpheus 'by his playing and singing won over the Greeks, changed the hearts of barbarians and tamed wild beasts' (Ps.-Kallisth. 1. 42, 6. 7 = Kern, *test.* 144). He made men give up cannibalistic feasts, an achievement which in Graeco-Roman times was attributed to many gods without much discrimination ; but for Orpheus it can be traced back to the fifth century. (See ch. ii, n. 5.) He taught men also the arts of agriculture and in this way inclined their natures towards peace and gentleness. Themistios, who lived in the first century of the Byzantine Empire, but was a zealous reader of Plato and Aristotle, writes : 'Even the initiations and rites of Orpheus were not unconnected with the art of husbandry. That is in fact the explanation of

the myth when it describes him as charming and softening the hearts of all. The cultivated fruits which husbandry offers us have a civilising effect on human nature in general and on the habits of beasts; and the animal passions in our hearts it excises and renders harmless' (Them. *Or.* 30, 349*b* = Kern, *test.* 112).

Orpheus was not regarded as a god, but as a hero, in the sense of some one who could claim close kinship with the gods, in virtue of which he had certain superhuman powers, but who had to live the ordinary span of life and die like any other mortal. The tomb would be regarded as a sacred spot (there would in all probability be more than one), and a cult of the dead hero be found there. In general such a cult is quite clearly distinguished from the cult of a god. The cult of saints forms a serviceable parallel. Orpheus was probably never, certainly scarcely ever worshipped as a god.[18] He was, however, essentially a prophet and high priest of religion. This makes the question of his relations to the gods a particularly interesting one. Moreover, these relations appear a little strange if looked at in detail.

We can be quite clear on what I should say was the most important point to one who wants to know the facts about classical Greek religion. To the question 'who was the god of the Orphic religion?' there can be but one answer—Dionysos. Orpheus was a religious founder, and the religion he founded was a species of the Bacchic. This remains a fair answer in spite of the qualifications with which it is at once necessary to safeguard it. First of all the remarks at the beginning of the last chapter must not be forgotten. Other gods not only existed (and the writings of Orpheus included a theogony), but were owed their due of prayer and sacrifice; but Dionysos was the centre. Secondly, Dionysos, like many other deities, was *Polyonymos*, worshipped under many names, and also with many different epithets before his name. The names and epithets of a god, though sometimes obscure, may reveal many things, *e.g.* the aspects of life that are his particular province, or the fact that among some people he has usurped the cult once paid to another deity in the same place. In the course of time he can accumulate a mass of these titles which leave no doubt of his composite origin, without necessarily losing unity in the eyes of his worshippers.

Certainly from the time of Herodotus the Orphic religion was Bacchic. Yet we have seen that Orpheus himself is far from being a Bacchic figure. If he preached the religion of

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