

# The Life of Orpheus – Contributions to European Culture

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## *Abstract*

Orpheus is one of the greatest historical contributions of the Thracians in European culture. He is much more than a talented poet and singer. He is a religious reformer, a priest and a Teacher, who transmits valuable knowledge to humanity. This study presents his life and influence on philosophers such as Pythagoras and Plato, the development of this influence during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and analyzes some Orphic tablets of eschatological nature. The roots of Orphic teachings are so deep, that some missionaries of the new Christian faith had to use the image of Orpheus in their desire to baptize pagans. Orpheus comes to walk the most difficult path – spreading the doctrine of salvation of the human soul, which remains one of the highest achievements of European culture and a hope for its humane future.

*Keywords:* Orpheus, Thracian Orphism, Orphic literature and eschatology, Orphic tablets.

## 1. Introduction

*“...Pythagoras, who was a reformer of Orphism as Orpheus was a reformer of the religion of Dionysus. From Pythagoras Orphic elements entered into the philosophy of Plato, and from Plato into most later philosophy...”*

– Bertrand Russell<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to write about the Thracian Great Initiate Orpheus.<sup>2</sup> Historians and researchers often come to diametrically opposite conclusions while analysing same historical sources (Yordanova, 2009: 21; cf. Guthrie, 1935, and Linforth, 1941). The sources are contradictory as well – according to Aristotle, for example, Orpheus did not exist at all (Ross, 1952: 80). When we talk about Orpheus, we should also examine the philosophical, cultural and religious aspects related to him. This study will present my vision of the life of Orpheus.<sup>3</sup> This will

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<sup>1</sup> Russell, 1947: 37. Russell was a Nobel Laureate, Member of the House of Lords of Great Britain (1931-1970), philosopher, mathematician and historian.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is inspired by the book *The Great Initiates* of Édouard Schuré – French philosopher and historian, one of the great researchers of the occult teachings and the biographies of Teachers of the rank of Jesus, Hermes, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, Moses, Krishna, Rama.

<sup>3</sup> I will deliberately avoid referring to sources of a mythological nature as the rescue of Eurydice from the underworld. Their analysis would seem too speculative for the modern rational mind and would add further confusion to the already complex matter.

require an analysis of the Orphic mysteries and eschatology, without which we can't delve deeper into the beliefs of the Thracians.

- Orpheus reforms Dionysus rites – a complete abolition of blood sacrifices and abstinence from animal food.
- Orphism is not limited to the Balkans. There is a widespread Orphic tradition across the Mediterranean.
- Pythagoras and Plato are Orphics.
- The image of Orpheus has been used to convert into Christianity.

One of the greatest historical contributions of the Thracians in European and world culture is called Orpheus (Fol, 2008: 6-7). Orpheus is much more than a talented poet and singer. Pausanias calls him a “*great magician*”. Demosthenes describes him as “*the prophet of our most sacred mysteries*”. Orpheus is a religious reformer, a priest, a Teacher. His poems transmit valuable knowledge to humankind (Bernabé, 2009: 89). He awakens the initiate and inspires the eternal pursuit of Knowledge. A. Fol will call this process a “*pure theory of self-improvement*” (Fol, 1986: 166) and will name this Paleo-Balkan oral religious doctrine by the term “*Thracian Orphism*”, taught in a closed male aristocratic circle, based on the teaching of the “*immortality of the intellectual energy*” (Fol, 2006: 8). “*Ignorance / not knowing is the vice of the soul*” (Fol, 2004: 15).<sup>4</sup>

The name Orpheus was first mentioned in the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC by the poet Ibycus (Fr. 10a). The name is accompanied by the definition “*the renowned*”, which shows that it is a matter of recording a long oral tradition. It is possible to obtain the approximate period of Orpheus' birth. Apollonius of Rhodes (1.30) leaves us information that the voyage of the Argonauts took place before the Trojan War, and Orpheus was one of the main participants in it. Herodotus (2.145.4) dates the Trojan War “*eight hundred years before me*”. Thus we come to the dating of ca. 13<sup>th</sup> century BC – seven centuries before the first written sources. The inscriptions from the Parian Marble (IG XII 5.444) from 264-263 BC point to the 14<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Diodorus Siculus (3.65) has left us information about the origin of Orpheus – heir to a royal family. His grandfather Harops is initiated into the secret mysteries of the universe, which are passed on to his father – Oeagrus, and later – to himself. It is this knowledge that makes him one of the most educated people of his time and will be called “*superior of all men in gifts and education*”. After devoting all his time to self-improvement, he continues his education at one of the greatest mystical schools on the planet – the one in Memphis, Egypt (1.96), becoming “*the greatest amongst the Greeks in the knowledge of the gods and their rites, as well as poetry and music*” (4.25).

According to the world-renowned authority on ancient religion and mythology, F. Graf, in the music and poetry of Orpheus there is something far deeper than aristocracy and entertainment. In ancient times the words of the poet elevated the souls of the listeners (Graf, 2007: 169). Orpheus purified through music; sacred lyrics are easier to remember with music, they are rhythmic (Fol, 2020: 72). A. Fol: “*Music is what awakens knowledge. Knowledge is in ourselves. We are born with spiritual knowledge, but it must be awakened. Orpheus awakens this knowledge with his music.*” Music is the wordless language that connects all living things.

The education in the secret mysteries often leads to healing abilities.<sup>5</sup> According to Pausanias (9.30.4), Orpheus “*reached a high level of power because he was believed to have*

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<sup>4</sup> All data about Thracian Orphism refers to Fol, 1986; 1991; 1994; 1995; 2002; 2004.

<sup>5</sup> For prophetic abilities see Iliev, 2014. For other abilities – Bogdanov, 1991: 111, cf. Neykova, 2003: 362.

discovered [...] cures for diseases”. Pliny the Elder (30.7) writes that Orpheus “made progress in superstitious healing”.

### 1.1 Religious reform

Orpheus begins with a reform of Dionysian rites – a complete abolition of blood sacrifices. It is also important that people move from a collective connection with the Creator, carried out during certain feasts, to the individual connection, personal communication. This is achieved through cleansing practices. Purification, in addition to abstaining from animal food, can be done through music – a reform is needed by moving from the violent and harsh rhythms of percussion instruments, to the gentle vibration and soothing sound of the lyre. This music affects the psyche, supports inner immersion and leads to the mystery of silence. Mystery is born in silence. Only then can the voice of god be heard.

Like other teachings Orpheus probably had a deep understanding of the influence of the sun. According to Eratosthenes (Cat. 24) Orpheus did not worship Dionysus, but Helios (Greek: Sun), who he called Apollo and “would wait for the sunrise, so as to be the first to see the sun” on Mount Pangaion.<sup>6</sup> This angered Dionysus. As any great reformer, Orpheus made enemies. His reluctance to initiate women into the secret (sacred) doctrine of Orphism, embittered the female worshippers of the old faith and the cult of Dionysus – the Meanads, called Bacchanalians by the Romans. It was they who cruelly killed Orpheus.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.2 Orpheus’ influence. Thracian Orphism

The perpetuation of the image of Orpheus begins. His first depictions on ancient Greek vases present him as an Apollonian type singer, surrounded by Thracian nobility. The Hellenic and Thracian elements in the scene show the idea of the authors to combine Orpheus’ native environment with the gradual Hellenization of his image. This Hellenization is completely done at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, when philologists mythographically processed the legend of Orpheus in the Mouseion at Alexandria. Since then, this character has found a lasting place in Greco-Roman literature and fine arts (Fol, 1993: 204). Subsequently, when Hellenic culture became the basis of modern European culture, the soul of Orpheus became the soul of Europe – “...[the] impulse Orpheus succeeded in communicating to Greece has been passed...to whole Europe” (Schuré, 1922: 300).

In the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries a number of authors interpreted the semantics of the image of Orpheus as the greatest religious leader of the Hellenes of the Archaic period. According to F. Creuzer (1810), Orpheus and his mysteries played an important role in the civilizing of early Greece and the Orphic reform itself being derived genetically from Eastern religious ideas. From this point begins what has subsequently become the traditional opposition between minimalist and maximalist (or “rationalists and mystics”, Burkert, 2004) scholars about the influence of Orphism, with the maximalists gaining significant ground after the archaeological discoveries of the 1970s and 1980s (Yordanova, 2009: 14, 22).

The father of Thracology in Bulgaria, Prof. Alexander Fol, came to the conclusion that Thracian Orphism, although partially, became a component of Hellenic spiritual life (Fol, 1986:

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<sup>6</sup> The ancient tradition to greet the sunrise was also professed by the Pythagoreans, Essenes, Hermetics, Manicheans, Bogomils in Bulgaria and their ideological successors in France – the Cathars.

<sup>7</sup> According to an alternative version of Pausanias (9.30.5): “Some say that Orpheus came to his end by being struck by a thunderbolt, hurled at him by the god [Zeus] because he revealed sayings in the mysteries to men who had not heard them before.”

168). The oral Thracian Orphism arose from Mediterranean beliefs with Egyptian influence. Archaeological, written, epigraphic, numismatic and ethnological data outline two levels of confession: a secret (sacred) and overt (profane) (see also Popov, 1989).

The first is aristocratic and belongs to the initiated in the sacred knowledge of the religious system. The second is popular/mass and belongs to those who know about the doctrine, but remain uninitiated in it or are simply its adherents (Popov, 2014: 8). The aristocratic level is inspired by the “mysterical ecstasy” (*esktasis*) – by the elevation of the initiate into the deity with the belief that he will attain complete spiritual and intellectual immortality. The popular and mass level is based on “mysterical enthusiasm” (*enthousiasmos*) – on the obsession that brings the deity into the believer in the hope of purifying them, releasing them from evil (Fol, 2008: 46).

Both levels of faith are reflected in the literary tradition of Greco-Roman antiquity and were registered even in during the sixties of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. In addressing Emperor Julian, the Apostate and in denouncing the impure non-originality of Paganism, Gregory of Nazianzus asked about the origin of his – of the Roman ruler – “*ability to be initiated and to be possessed. Is it not from the Thracians?*” (Fol, 2006: 8, Greg. Nazian. *Contra Julianem Imperatorem* 1).

Thracian Orphism, as a religious doctrine, was transferred to the organized and hierarchically structured Hellenic Olympic religiosity of the Greek polis in the form of literary-philosophical doctrine with Pythagorean roots, while in Thrace it was professed in oral folk/mass rites until the establishment of Christianity and dominated the whole society (Popov, 2012: 223).

Fol dates the formation of Thracian Orphism in Mycenaean Greece and Thrace from the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC until at least the 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century BC in Mycenaean Thrace and the ethnic Hellenic areas. Hellenic literary Orphism was created in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC began the decline of the Thracian doctrine and the Hellenic philosophical teachings. In the 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century the integration of the open mysterical folk/mass faith in folk Christianity began, traces of which are preserved in Southeastern Europe to this day, and between the 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century there was a philosophical-Neoplatonic processing of Orphic views (Fol, 2004: 10).

From Pythagoras onwards and thanks to Plato, the oral Orphic teaching became an intellectual refuge of select initiates in the Hellenic polis (Fol, 2002: 68). Pythagoras and Plato are Orphics.<sup>8</sup> Pythagoras is the most deeply connected with Orpheus. Proclus writes: “...*Timaeus, being a Pythagorean, follows the Pythagorean principles. But these are the Orphic traditions. For what Orpheus delivered mystically through arcane narrations, this Pythagoras learned, being initiated by Aglaophemus in the mystic wisdom which Orpheus derived...*” (Euser, 2010: 291A/3168). Bertrand Russell adds: “...*Pythagoras, who was a reformer of Orphism as Orpheus was a reformer of the religion of Dionysus. From Pythagoras Orphic elements entered into the philosophy of Plato, and from Plato into later philosophy...*” (Russell, 1947: 37).

## 2. Orphic literature and eschatology

The earliest evidence of the existence of Orphic literature is preserved in the tragedy Hippolytus of Euripides<sup>9</sup> and in Plato’s *The Republic*.<sup>10</sup> Thanks to the Hellenes, Orphism was not

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<sup>8</sup> Plato (*Meno*, 81b) leaves us information about Socrates’ knowledge in the dialogue between Socrates and Menon. Socrates: “*I have heard from wise men and women who told of things divine [...], that the soul of man is immortal, and at one time comes to an end, which is called dying, and at another is born again, but never perishes.*” See also Hütwohl, 2016: 37.

<sup>9</sup> Theseus ironized his son Hippolytus for his attachment to the Orphic books (*Hipp.* 952).

<sup>10</sup> Where it is said that wandering prophets offer a whole bunch of books to Orpheus and Musaeus (*Rep.* 2.364). According to A. Fol, Plato made an ingenious record of the Thracian Orphic doctrine (Fol, 1991: 23).

limited only to the Balkans. Evidence of a widespread Orphic tradition throughout the Mediterranean are the hundreds of artifacts found: the Orphic papyri of Derveni,<sup>11</sup> Gurob and Callatis, bone graffiti and sacred objects from the Miletus colony of Olbia, vase paintings from Attica and southern Italy, gold plaques from southern Italy, Crete and northern Greece, all painted with similar plots.



Image 1. Map of the Hellenic Orphic monuments in the Mediterranean (Yordanova, 2004: 288)

According to Prof. F. M. Müller<sup>12</sup> “Without faith in personal immortality, religion is like an arch laid on a single pillar or bridge ending in an abyss.” Orphic literature teaches us what awaits us after death. The canonical texts written on the Orphic gold tablets serve as a guide for the soul in the afterlife. I will analyze some of them, entering the deep depths of eschatology, and, as expected, the interpretations of the texts are highly subjective, but not devoid of logic and consistency for the researcher of this and other similar teachings.

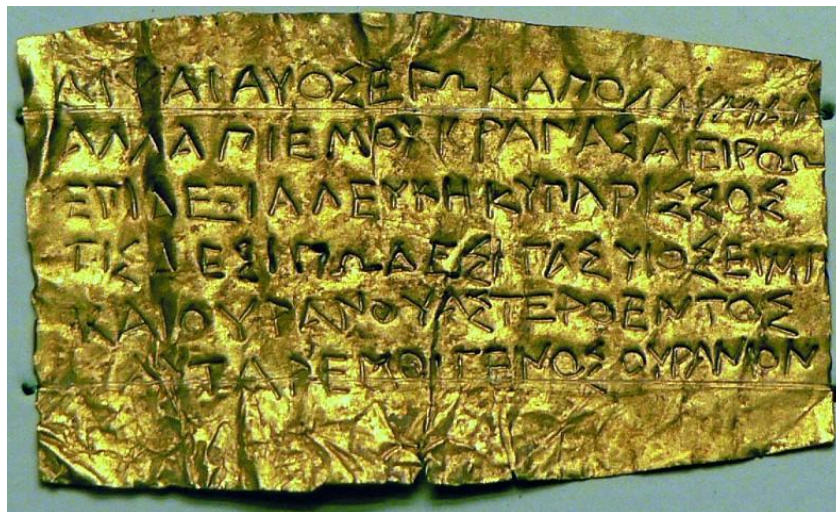


Image 2. Golden Orphic tablet from the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Thessaly

F.e.: „those of us [...] lived what is called an “Orphic life,” keeping wholly to inanimate food” (Plato. Laws, 6.782). See also Plato: Phaedo 62b, 69c, 70c.

<sup>11</sup> The oldest Hellenic papyrus (340-320 BC), discovered in 1962, published anonymously in 1982.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) was a philologist, specialist in Indology, mythology, history of religion. One of the founders of modern religious studies.



Text from an Orphic tablet from Thurii, Italy (Graf, 2007: 15):

*I come pure from the pure, Queen of the Chthonian Ones, [...]  
For I also claim to be of your happy race.  
I have paid the penalty for unrighteous deeds.*

The self-determination of sacred purity in the Orphic language is equivalent to holiness. The Orphic understanding that the soul must be purified through redemption in order to become a Hero (*hērōs*) and a god is expressed in the texts of Pindar (Olympian, 2) and Empedocles (Inwood, 2001: 55-68).

The Orphic tablet from Hyponion, Italy (Graf, 2007: 5):<sup>13</sup>

*This is the work of Memory, when you are about to die  
down to the well- built house of Hades. There is a spring at the right side,  
and standing by it a white cypress.  
Descending to it, the souls of the dead refresh themselves.  
Do not even go near this spring!  
Ahead you will find from the Lake of Memory,  
cold water pouring forth; there are guards before it.  
They will ask you, with astute wisdom,  
what you are seeking in the darkness of murky Hades.  
Say, "I am a son of Earth and starry Sky,  
I am parched with thirst and am dying; but quickly grant me  
cold water from the Lake of Memory to drink."  
And they will announce you to the Chthonian King,  
and they will grant you to drink from the Lake of Memory.  
And you, too, having drunk, will go along the sacred road on which other  
glorious initiates and bacchoi travel.*

According to Herodotus (2.81) Orphic practices are close to the Egyptian and Pythagorean. Orphic texts are undoubtedly influenced by the Egyptian Book of the Dead.<sup>14</sup> Memory loss is a central topic of in-depth research on the issue and of paramount interest to the aristocracy of antiquity<sup>15</sup> – the initiate does not want to return to the painful cycle of incarnations.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Orpheus and Christianity

At the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, almost 15 centuries after the death of Orpheus, the missionaries of the new Christian faith in the person of one of the early fathers of the church – St. Clement of Alexandria – had to use the image of the Thracian Teacher in order to baptize pagans. The Greek theologian skillfully uses the figure Orpheus as the singer whose miraculous song

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<sup>13</sup> “*Memory*” is Graf’s preferred translation of “*Mnemosyne*” – the goddess of memory and remembrance. In Orphic notions Mnemosyne possesses a lake of living water and awakens the memory of past rebirths (Yordanova, 2004: 86).

<sup>14</sup> Common plots are: quenching the thirst of souls with cold water, a ban on passing certain paths, guards asking questions, underground kings (Merkelbach, 1999: 5ff). The guidance of the soul after death is also the purpose of the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

<sup>15</sup> According to the founder of Egyptology in Bulgaria and Minister of Education (2009–2013) Prof. Sergei Ignatov his teacher was reading Egyptian literature 18 hours a day, after retirement he isolated himself and his only occupation was to practice the Book of the Dead, for to prepare for the reality after death (Ignatov, 2021: 21). We also find an interesting plot in 1462 – Cosimo de’ Medici prioritized the translation of Corpus Hermeticum, which had just arrived from Constantinople, in order to read it before his death (Hanegraaff 2012: 42).

<sup>16</sup> “*I have flown out of the heavy, difficult circle [...]. – Happy and blessed, you will be a god instead of a mortal!*” is an excerpt from an Orphic tablet in Thurii (Graf, 2007: 13). See also Merkelbach, 1999: 9.

charms wild animals, comparing it to the Word of Christ, charming even the wildest animals – humans, thus describing Christ as the new, better Orpheus (Jourdan, 2014: 113; Reden, 1981).

In the catacombs of Rome, we find frescoes depicting Orpheus, perhaps as the Good Shepherd Christ, which were, most probably, also used in a similar way for baptism, representing scenes of peace that evoke association with Christ (Jourdan, 2014: 125).



Image 3. Orpheus, St. Callixtus catacomb, Rome, early 3<sup>rd</sup> century



Image 4. Orpheus, St. Peter and Marcellinus catacombs, Rome, early 4<sup>th</sup> century



Image 5. Orpheus, Domitilla catacomb, Rome, around 360 AD.

Depictions of Orpheus did not appear in his homeland Thrace until the Greco-Roman syncretism of the 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century, when the southern Danubian lands became Roman provinces. The most famous depiction from this period is from a sundial, dated 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century – an artifact without parallel in the Roman Empire.



Image 6. Sundial with the image of Orpheus from Silistra, Bulgaria (Durostorum), 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century

If the classical era was dominated by the idea of Orpheus as the founder of mystery religion and theologian, Hellenistic and Roman poetry celebrated him as a poet-prophet and emphasized on the myth of Eurydice's rescue. The Christian reception, largely influenced by Platonism, creates a very different Orpheus as an allegory of the soul ascending to heaven and light. While the receptions of Orpheus in the Middle Ages focused on the interpretation of the image of the Thracian singer,<sup>17</sup> the Renaissance revived the ancient figure of the poet of religious hymns, the theologian and the most ancient founder of rituals and philosophical traditions (Lozanova, 2019).

In 1423, the largest and best collection of Greek texts to reach the West was brought to Venice from Constantinople, 30 years before its fall – 238 manuscripts containing all the works of Plato, Plotinus, Proclus, most of the works of Greek historians including Diodorus of Sicily, as well as copies of Orphic poems and the Orphic Hymns, composed, presumably, between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. The appearance of a wide range of manuscripts with ancient texts in the Western world gave rise to many new aspects of reception and interpretation, resurrecting Orphism from Antiquity and becoming especially popular among Italian Hermetics (Lozanova, 2019). In this period Orpheus, along with Hermes, Pythagoras and Plato was considered one of the ancient sages of Antiquity, preaching the secrets of immortality (Voss, 2002), and in Romanticism he was a significant figure for German and French poets (Lozanova, 2020: 8). Today the image of Orpheus continues to be embodied in thousands of works of art, poetry, music, painting, opera and cinematography (see Miles, 1999: 54ff).

#### 4. Conclusion

Orpheus outgrows his contemporaries and realizes that his lyre could be more influential than thousands of swords. His teachings leave deep traces throughout the ancient world and enters the pantheon of immortality of human consciousness. The Great initiate understands

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<sup>17</sup> Known mainly by Virgil (*Georgics*, 4.453-527) and Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, 10, 1-105).



that salvation of mankind is possible only through wisdom, knowledge and self-improvement. Orpheus comes to walk the most difficult path – spreading the doctrine of salvation of the human soul. The Orphic belief in immortality remains one of the highest achievements of European culture and a hope for its humane future (Fol, 2008: 98).

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