

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 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

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

- Pausanias calls him a *"great magician"*.
- Demosthenes: *"the prophet of our most sacred mysteries"*.
- The great initiate Orpheus is a religious reformer, a priest, a Teacher. His poems transmit valuable knowledge to humankind. He awakens the initiate and inspires the eternal pursuit of Knowledge.
- A. Fol. 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"*. *„Ignorance is the vice of the soul“*.

- ▶ The name Orpheus was first mentioned in the the 6th c. BC by the poet Ibycus - *"the renowned,,. A matter of recording a long oral tradition.*
- ▶ Apollonius of Rhodes: that the voyage of the Argonauts took place before the Trojan War, and Orpheus was one of the main participants in it.
- ▶ Herodotus dates the Trojan War *"eight hundred years before me"*. Thus we come to the dating of ca. 13th c. BC – seven centuries before the first written sources. The inscriptions from the Parian Marble from 264–263 BC point to the 14th c. BC.
- ▶ Diodorus Sicilus: heir to a royal family. His grandfather Harops is initiated into the secret mysteries, passed on to his father – Oeagrus. Orpheus is *"superior of all men in gifts and education"*. His education in Memphis (Egypt) makes him *"the greatest amongst the Greeks in the knowledge of the gods and their rites, as well as poetry and music"*.

- ▶ 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.
- ▶ 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."*
- ▶ Healing abilities. Pausanias: Orpheus *"reached a high level of power because he was believed to have discovered [...] cures for diseases"*. Pliny the Elder: Orpheus *"made progress in superstitious healing"*.

Religious reform

- ▶ Complete abolition of blood sacrifices of Dionysian rites. From a collective connection with the Creator during feasts to the individual connection, personal communication and cleansing practices. In addition to abstaining from animal food, through music – a reform: 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.
- ▶ Orpheus greets the sunrise. An ancient tradition, later professed by the Pythagoreans, Essenes, Hermetics, Manicheans, Bogomils in Bulgaria and their ideological successors in France – the Cathars.
- ▶ Eratosthenes: Orpheus did not worship Dionysus, but Helios (Greek: Sun), who he called Apollo. This angered Dionysus. 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 Maenads. It was they who cruelly killed Orpheus.

Orpheus' influence

- ▶ His first depictions on ancient Greek vases present him as an Apollonian type singer, surrounded by Thracian nobility – an attempt of gradual Hellenization of his image, completely done at the end of the 4th c. BC, when philologists mythographically processed the legend of Orpheus in the Mouseion at Alexandria.
- ▶ 17th-18th c. - Orpheus interpreted as the greatest religious leader of the Hellenes. Friedrich Creuzer: Orpheus and his mysteries played an important role in the civilizing of early Greece. From this point begins the traditional opposition between minimalist and maximalist (“rationalists and mystics”) scholars about the influence of Orphism, with the maximalists gaining significant ground after the archaeological discoveries of the 1970s and 1980s.

Thracian Orphism

- ▶ A. Fol: Thracian Orphism partially became a component of Hellenic spiritual life. 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).
- ▶ 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. 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.

- ▶ 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.
- ▶ Fol dates the formation of Thracian Orphism in Mycenaean Greece and Thrace from the end of the 2nd millennium BC until at least the 5th–4th c. BC. Hellenic literary Orphism was created in the 6th c. BC and from the 4th c. BC began the decline of the Thracian doctrine and the Hellenic philosophical teachings. In the 1st–4th c. the integration of the open mysterial folk/mass faith in folk Christianity began, and between the 3rd–6th c. there was a philosophical-Neoplatonic processing of Orphic views.

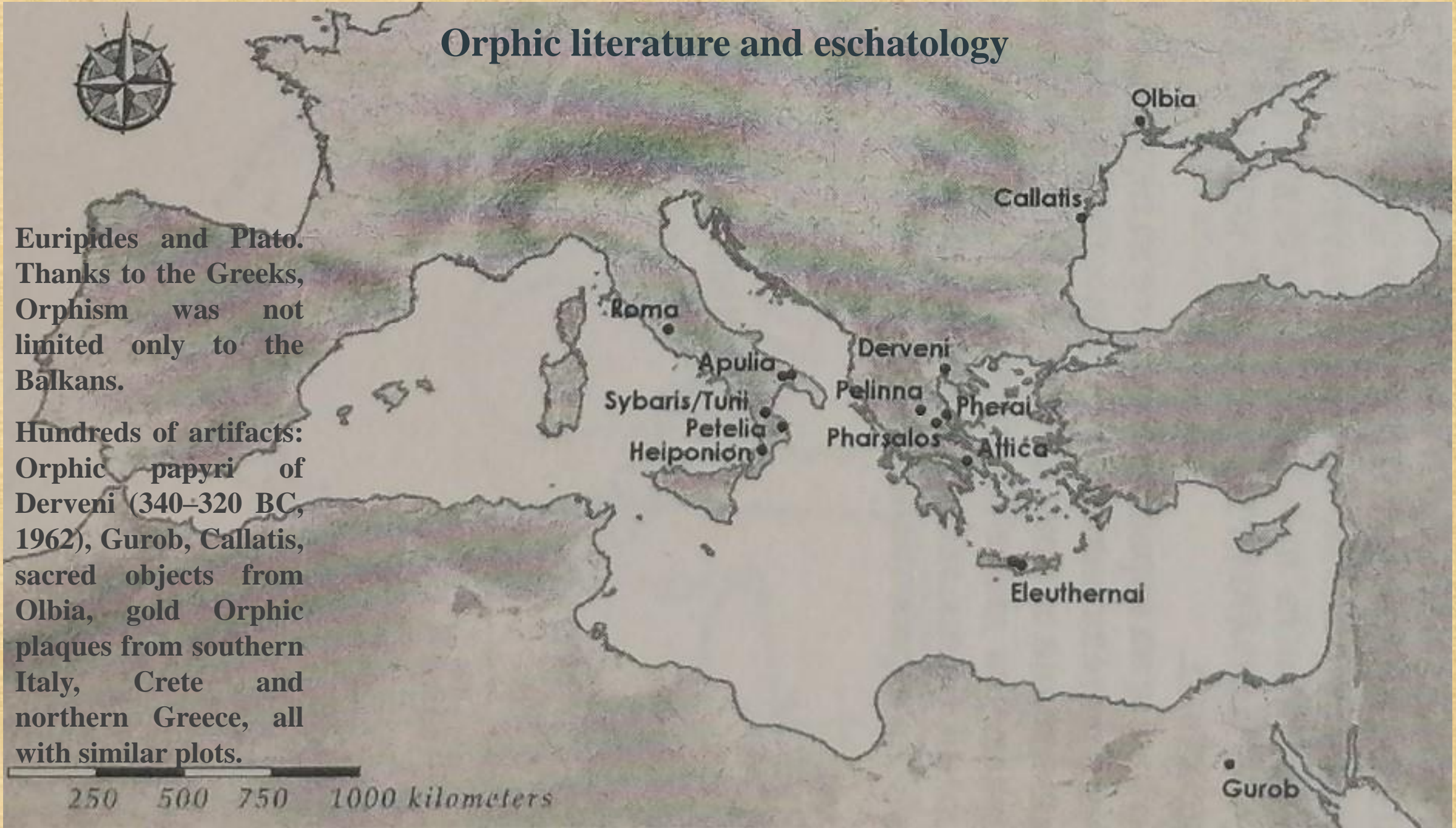
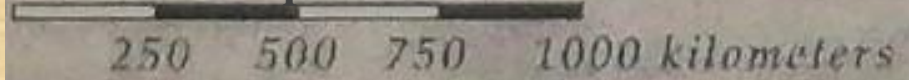
- ▶ After Pythagoras and thanks to Plato, the oral Orphic teaching transmits into the Hellenic polis. Pythagoras and Plato are Orphics. Pythagoras is the most deeply connected with Orpheus.
- ▶ Proclus: „...*Pythagorean principles. But these are the Orphic traditions. For what Orpheus delivered mystically through arcane narrations...*“.
- ▶ Plato 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.*“

Orphic literature and eschatology

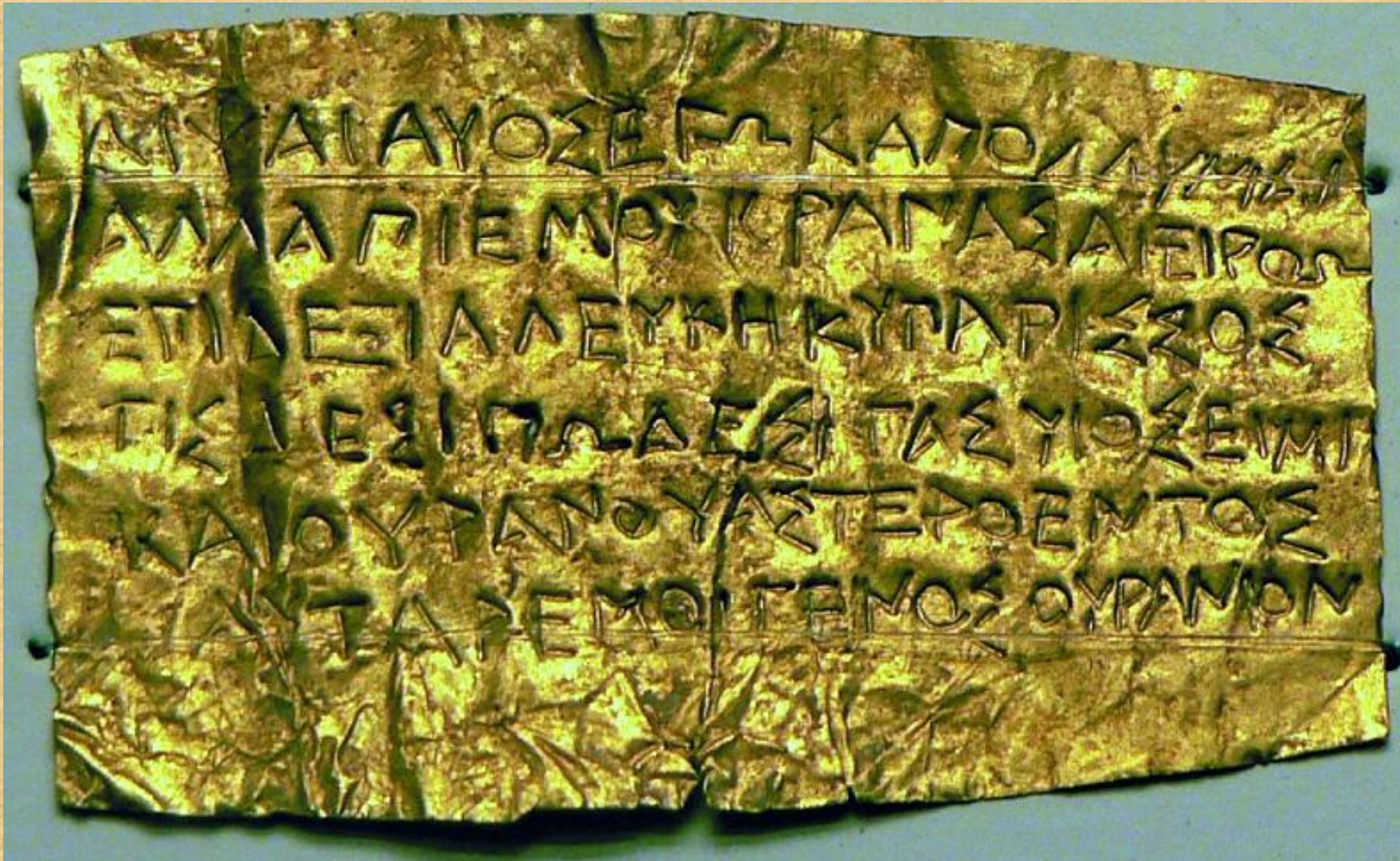


Euripides and Plato.
Thanks to the Greeks,
Orphism was not
limited only to the
Balkans.

Hundreds of artifacts:
Orphic papyri of
Derveni (340–320 BC,
1962), Gurob, Callatis,
sacred objects from
Olbia, gold Orphic
plaques from southern
Italy, Crete and
northern Greece, all
with similar plots.



Map of the Hellenic Orphic monuments in the Mediterranean



Golden Orphic tablet from 4th c. BC, Thessaly

Orphic literature teaches us what awaits us after death.
The texts on the Orphic gold tablets serve as a guide for the soul in the afterlife.

This is the work of Memory [Mnemosyne], 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.*

**Mnemosyne is the goddess of memory and remembrance. In Orphic notions Mnemosyne possesses a lake of living water and awakens the memory of past rebirths*

- ▶ Memory loss is a of paramount interest to the aristocracy of antiquity. The initiate does not want to return to the painful cycle of incarnations. Excerpt from an Orphic tablet in Thurii: „*I have flown out of the heavy, difficult circle [...]. – Happy and blessed, you will be a god instead of a mortal!*“.
- ▶ Herodotus: Orphic practices are close to the Egyptian and Pythagorean.
- ▶ Orphic texts are undoubtedly influenced by the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Common plots: quenching the thirst of souls with cold water, a ban on passing certain paths, guards asking questions, underground kings.
- ▶ The guidance of the soul after death is also the purpose of the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

- ▶ 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.
- ▶ 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.

Orpheus and Christianity

- ▶ At the end of the 2nd c., 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 charms wild animals, comparing it to the Word of Christ, charming even the wildest animals – humans, thus describing Christ as the new, better Orpheus



*Orpheus, St. Callixtus catacomb, Rome,
early 3rd century*



*Orpheus, St. Peter and Marcellinus catacombs, Rome,
early 4th century*

In the catacombs of Rome we find frescoes depicting Orpheus, perhaps as the Good Shepherd Christ. Used for baptism, representing scenes of peace that evoke association with Christ.



Orpheus, Domitilla catacomb, Rome, around 360 AD.



Sundial with the image of Orpheus from Silistra, Bulgaria (Durostorum), 2nd –3rd

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

- ▶ In 1423, the largest 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, copies of Orphic poems and the Orphic Hymns, composed 2nd-3rd c. This resurrected Orphism from Antiquity and became especially popular among Italian Hermetics.
- ▶ In this period Orpheus, along with Hermes, Pythagoras and Plato was considered one of the ancient sages of Antiquity, preaching the secrets of immortality.
- ▶ In Romanticism he was a significant for German and French poets.
- ▶ Today there is still huge interest in Orpheus, even more so in the context of the archaeological discoveries of recent decades.

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 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.