

## Orpheus and early Christianity: The Jerusalem Orpheus mosaic

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**Abstract.** The spread and enforcement of Christianity is accompanied by a slow process of creating its own symbols in fine arts and architectural forms. To a large extent, this process is closely related to the traditional means of expression inherited from paganism. An interesting example in this regard is the composition with *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* on the Orpheus mosaic found in Jerusalem in 1901. The history of the figurative scheme goes back to the end of the Archaic and the beginning of the Classical Era, and illustrates eventually a sustainable literary tradition with extremely scarce, devoid of narrative details. The religious concepts of this ancient Orphic tradition are probably integrated and absorbed by early Christianity and preserved in a funeral context until the 6th century BC.

The aim of the analysis is to offer new details to the interpretation of the scene, which – in combination with the fragmented poetic evidence – allows the reconstruction of a possible mythological precedent for the journey of Orpheus to the World Beyond where he attained the mystic theological knowledge that allowed him to lay the foundations of the mystical initiations. Those eschatological notions were projected in some early Christian communities in the period between the 2nd and the mid-6th century, as indicated by sacral and funerary monuments.

**Keywords:** Orpheus, *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals*, mosaic, Jerusalem, early Christianity

The dissemination and imposition of Christianity were accompanied by a slow process of creating own symbols in the visual arts and in architectural forms. To a great extent that process is closely dependent on the traditional means of expression, inherited from paganism. The composition with *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* is an interesting example in this respect. The scene can be traced back to at last the end of the Archaic and the beginning of the Classical period (Kern 1938, 188, n. 2; see Schoeller 1969), illustrating a stable literary tradition with extremely scarce narrative, lacking details, which suggests a possible mystical character.

The earliest evidence is a scene described by Otto Kern (Kern 1938, 188, n. 2), depicted on a cup from his own collection, which he dates to the transition between the 7th and the 6th centuries BC. The figure of Orpheus on it appears



**Fig. 1.** Fresco from the so-called “Throne Room” in the temple/palace (?) in Pylos – a male figure playing a lyre, called “Orpheus”, 13th century BC

surrounded by birds perched on the branch hanging over his head, and with a doe at his feet. The image is known only from Otto Kern’s own description, which we have no reason to doubt.

The motif is quite ancient and seems to date back to the Minoan Age. A fresco from the eastern corner of the so-called “Throne Room” in the temple/palace (?) in Pylos presents a musician with a lyre, associated with “Orpheus”/“Apollo”, dated to the 13th century BC (Fig. 1). The scene shows a male figure in a long robe, seated on a rock and playing a lyre, “apparently charming a strange flying creature before him” (Blegen 1956, 95–101; cf. Blegen, Rawson 1966, 79, Fig. 75).

A man in a long decorated robe, holding a lyre, around whom birds are flying, appears on the *pyxis* from a chamber tomb at Kalami (Late Minoan IIIB period, ca. 1300–1250 BC), today in the Archaeological Museum of Chania, Crete (Fig. 2). Horns of consecration and double-axes are depicted, emphasizing the sacral suggestions of the scene. These works of art support Robert Böhme’s hypothesis (Böhme 1970) that the figure of Orpheus could be dated at least to the Mycenaean period. The two images are associated with a sacral context and bear mystic suggestions of a space remote from the inhabitable world.



**Fig. 2.** A lyre musician charms the birds, ca. 1300–1250 BC (Late Minoan III B period), a *pyxis* from a chamber tomb at Kalami, today in the Archaeological Museum of Chania, Crete

The scene *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* acquired new popularity during the Roman Imperial Age when “villas” (?) like the one in Casa d’Orfeo in Pompeii, Volubilis (Morocco), Zaragoza, Paphos, etc. were decorated with the familiar theme; temples, walls and ceilings in catacombs and tombs, a few sarcophagi (Vieillefon 2003, 191–193 S1–S10), were covered with these images and decorated with mosaics from the 2nd century AD onwards until about the 5th–mid-6th centuries AD (Garezou 1994, 96–97, 104).

The aim of the present paper is to offer new details to the interpretation of the scene, which – in combination with the fragmented poetic evidence – allows the reconstruction of a possible mythological precedent for the journey of Orpheus to the World Beyond where he attained the mystic theological knowledge that allowed him to lay the foundations of the mysterial initiations. Those eschatological notions were projected in some early Christian communities in the period between the 2nd and the mid-6th centuries, as indicated by sacral and funerary monuments.

Here I would like to specify immediately that the iconographic pattern of Orpheus as the “Good Shepherd” (Fig. 3) bears the characteristics of remoteness



**Fig. 3.** Catacombs of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome.

Iconographic scheme of the “Good Shepherd” in the mausoleum of Galla Placidia, daughter of Emperor Theodosius I, Ravenna, first half of the 5th century (mosaic)

from the “Orpheus Charming/Taming Wild Animals” pattern, because there is a clear contrast between two different civilizational spaces (tamed and wild) and their respective representations of the symbolically suggested landscape. The situation is also similar with the association of the scene with the prophecies of Isaiah II, where the two categories of tame and wild are combined as a symbol of the future peace in the newcoming century.

Most of the images of the *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* scene are on mosaics: more than 91 examples have been catalogued (Jesnck 1997, 8–19, 68–90, 128–147; see Garezou 1994, Nr. 5–11, 13–16, 20–26, 28, 30, 35–36, 39, 43–45, 48a–c, 49, 51, 54–61, 63–64, 66–68, 73, 78, 88, 91, 143a–c, 145b–c, e–f, 146–147, 151–153, 155, 157–163, 164a, c, e, 165a–c, 166, 168, 172b–d, 173a). The motif appears much less frequently in funerary context: 28 examples are known, i.e., less than 10% of all presented images of that scene (Jesnck 1997, 128–147). The appearance of that unambiguously pagan scene in a Christian context is more intriguing.

The earliest monument of this type is the mosaic found near Edessa (Urfa), in Osrhoene (earlier – in the Dallas Museum of Art, now – in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul, No. 1642), dated to 194 AD (Luther 1999, 129–137; Healy 2006, 313–327; Possek 2008, 1–35; Van den Hoe, Herrmann 2013, 227), and the other from 228 AD. The culmination in the popularity and dissemination of the scene on monuments of pictorial art was during the 3rd–4th centuries, but interest in it persisted throughout the 5th century and began to wane in the



Fig. 4. The mosaic in Jerusalem (6th century)

second half of the 6th century. The mosaic in Jerusalem (6th century) (Hachlili 2009, 7) (Fig. 4) is the last monument known to us, and it is analysed as an example in the present paper.

I. In 1901, R. P. L. H. Vincent found the so-called “Orpheus Mosaic” in the necropolis north-west of the Damascene Gate in Jerusalem and in a Christian funerary context (!), a floor mosaic decorating a rectangular hall. It has been published by its discoverer in two articles in *Revue Biblique* (Vincent 1901, 436–444; Vincent 1902, 100–103) and is discussed in a number of publications (Bliss 1901, 46–49; Strzygowski, Dashian 1901, 139–165; Bagatti 1952, 145–160; Avi-Yonah 1933, Nr. 133, 172–173; Mucznik, Ovadiah, Turnhaim 2004, 193–208; Friedman 1969, 1–36; Jesnick 1997, Nr. 73, 141; Tülek 1998) focusing

predominantly on the strange discrepancy between the pagan motif and its Christian context (Olszewski 2008, 205–214, 226; Olszewski 2011, 655–664), as well as on the identification of the animals depicted (Friedman 1967, 1–13; Huskinson 1974, 68–97).

The central panel of the elaborate composition presents a beardless young Orpheus *en face*, with a Phrygian cap, in sitting position, dressed in the “Oriental” fashion and playing the *kitharos*. Pan and a centaur are depicted below him. The animals and the birds around his figure are depicted in a specific way: an eagle or hunting falcon (Avi-Yonah 1933, 172), its neck decorated with a stone pendant featuring a drawing of a cross (Friedman 1967); there is also a chained domesticated mongoose with a collar round its neck, attempting to catch a viper, a bear, ram, small bird, hare and possibly a lizard. The lowermost row of the composition features a centaur and Pan with syrinx, which finds parallels in a number of similar earlier compositions.

The parallels of that image in several textile works of art (Madigan 1992, 405–416; for the first time parallels are proposed by Strzygowski, Dashian 1901, 139–171) testify that we are not faced with some local exception in the interpretation of the theme:

Egyptian Textile, Moscow (private collection), later – in the Pushkin Museum, now – with unknown provenance: Pan in the upper right-hand quadrant, looking inward and holding a syrinx in his hand;

Egyptian Textile, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, originating from a cemetery at Akhmim, Egypt; the figure of Pan with syrinx in his hand is placed between Orpheus and the right-hand frame of the artefact;

Egyptian Textile, New York (private collection): Orpheus among the animals, flanked by a pair of satyrs (Walters Art Gallery 1947, Nr. 806);

A textile from Egypt in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks (Madigan 1992, Plate 1).

To the artefacts described it is possible to add a fragmentary relief pediment from the Egyptian town of Mallawi, which is assumed to have originated from a tomb structure that preserves not Orpheus but his lyre, a selection of animals, and a Pan.

The elaborate composition of the ivory *pyxis* from the monastery of St. Columbano at Bobbio, published by Joseph Natanson (Natanson 1953, 70, Nr. 91), is complemented by the figures of a centaur and Pan among the animals, whereas the *pyxis* from the Abbey of St. Julien à Broude, today in the Bargello Museum, Florence (Graeven 1899, Fig. 2), is decorated with two centaurs accompanied by a pair of Sileni. Both artefacts are dated ca. 5th–6th centuries, and their origin is attributed to Alexandria (Friedman 1967, 1–13).

The funerary context of the composition with Orpheus from Jerusalem, surrounded by animals and mythological creatures, is complemented from the northeast with a small figural panel (0.70 x 0.67 m) with two standing female figures with halo around their heads, wearing long and richly decorated clothes, which – according to M. Avi-Yonah – followed 6th century fashion (according to the dating of Avi-Yonah 1933, 172–173). They are separated by a column on which the image of a sundial is hinted, being identified with an inscription as Theodosia and Georgia. The former is holding a flower (lily?), and the latter – a



**Fig. 5.** Theodosia and Georgia  
from the tomb with “The Orpheus Mosaic” in Jerusalem

bird (Fig. 5). The female figures are interpreted both as allegorical figures and as real humans, possibly images of the persons buried in the tomb (Friedman 1967, 1–13). My preferences are for the second hypothesis because stone structures rise on both sides of the images, who are supposed to have had ossuaria.

The dating of the mosaic varies within the wide range of the 2nd–7th centuries: the archaeologist who published the find, H. Vincent, proposes the 5th–7th centuries – according to the fashion of the clothes of the female figures (Vincent 1901, 436–444; Vincent 1902, 100–103); J. Strzygowski (Strzygowski, Dashian 1901, 139–165) – the 4th–5th centuries, perceiving influence from carpets of Egyptian origin, whereas M. Avi-Yonah imposes the widely accepted

dating today to the 6th century – according to the fashion in the Byzantine royal court then (Avi-Yonah 1933, 172–173).

The question that all researchers ask is invariably connected with the relation between the scene *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* and the Christian notions. The attempts at elementary identification of Orpheus with Christ as *psychopompos* seem to me unconvincing. It is likewise difficult to interpret the scene from an allegorical perspective. It tends to betray a stable mysterial narrative fed by psychagogic mythology.

II. The analysis of the formal basic components of the images suggests the hypothesis that the scene presented a sacral *topos* in the World Beyond.

1) **Rock, trees, plants.** In that scheme of themes Orpheus is depicted seated on a rock that is sometimes rugged and clearly presented (the mosaic from Paphos and Northern Syria, now in Hannover, Germany; the Orpheus mosaic from Miletus, Pergamon Museum, Berlin, ca. 200 AD, etc.), in other cases he is stylized in a cube (Orpheus Mosaic from Edessa, Turkey, 194 AD), or even in an elaborate decorated cubic box-like seat or throne (e.g., Orpheus Mosaic from Blanzky-lès-Fismes, Aisne, France, etc.). In some cases a tree or branches are added to the rocky desert landscape, on which compositions of representatives of the avian world are presented; low plants are hinted at or clearly depicted. In the Jerusalem mosaic it is not possible to see what Orpheus is sitting on, but the figures are framed everywhere by vegetation that is indication of wild space.

It is essential to add to the visual images the verbal description of the scene in *Imagines* (Εἰκόνας) by Philostratus the Younger (ca. mid-3rd century), irrespective of how schematic it is. Among the trees that had come to listen to the enchanting music of the Thracian he deliberately mentions a series of trees with chthonian and funerary connotations: pine, cypress, alder and black poplar before all other trees, “so that birds can perch on them and the musician can sing in the shade”. Needless to recall that cypresses provide an important orientation in the palace of Hades and the waters of Mnemosine in the texts of the Orphic gold tablets. Black alder often substitutes black poplar as being semantically equivalent (see the myth about the metamorphosis of Phaon). However, the *Spring of Life* is also depicted between two cypress trees in the Gardens of Eden from the Christian frescoes.

In fact, miracles do not happen in the profane space and in a profane situation! They also invariably indicate the deformed discourse of the World Beyond.

2) **Animals.** The details to which the strongest suggestions come from the wild animals surrounding Orpheus build the notion about space outside civilization and the human world. In addition to the conventional animals, exotic ones were also added frequently: tiger, lion, panther, elephant, camel, giraffe (Orpheus Mosaic at Santa Marinella I, Italy: Jesnick 1997, 78), etc.; among the birds: parrot, peacock, ostrich, etc., emphasizing the “remoteness” and the “otherness” of the space where the action takes place, far in the East...

3) **Oriental clothes** (Sezer 2015). The singer's figure appears in the theme *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* in principle in two iconographic types, provisionally characterized as Phrygian-Oriental and Greek types. In the first case he is wearing a Phrygian hat, a tunic with high waist tied with a belt, long sleeves and trousers widening down (*anaxyrides*), as well as a cloak on his shoulders. The Greek type presupposes the presentation of a naked figure with scanty clothing (short tunic or a *chiton*), or simply as a torso, as is suggested by the image of Orpheus from a mosaic at the Surgeon's house in Rimini. It is difficult to determine categorically at this level of analysis the extent to which the Phrygian-Oriental type can be interpreted as a means to denote the "otherness" of Orpheus or his "Oriental" origin, or whether it can be associated with the "otherness" of the space of the events presented, although the assumption should be made, even in hypothetical order. It seems to me that both possibilities are entirely logical.

4) **Other figures.** A series of images on mosaics, ivory *pyxis* and textiles originating predominantly from Egypt – possibly medallions that decorated funerary textiles – introduce strange and unusual figures in the theme as a centaur, Pan and Satyri marking the Dionysian mythological circle and Dionysian religious connotations. If for Janet Huskinson (Huskinson 1974, 72) these "digressions" from the theme result from transformations of wild Nature, which does not differ in principle from the conventional animals, according to B. Madigan (Madigan 1992, 416), the additional mythological figures are associated with the arrival of Dionysus' *thiasos* and forebode unambiguously the imminent death of Orpheus, and the funerary context of most of the artefacts should be directed to the idea that the power of his song would not help him to avoid death.

John Block Friedman (Friedman 1967, 8) is even convinced that Pan and the centaur are not in the least connected with the story of Orpheus, and he explains their combination with the syncretism of the Late Antiquity. All explanations lack the relation of cause and effect between Orpheus' mythology and Christian doctrinary notions.

It is likewise not true that the centaur is not related to Dionysus' characters. Mythology is well familiar with the twelve daemons, the Lamian Pheres that Zeus placed as guards of the young Dionysus against the scheming of the jealous Hera. In her revenge she transformed them into ox-horned Centaurs. They accompanied Dionysus in his Indian war. During the Antiquity centaurs were often depicted in the *thiasos* of Dionysus or pulled his chariot (Nonn. *Dionys.* 14.143 ff.; 247 ff.). Consequently, the image of a centaur in combination with Pan/Silenus in the scene of Orpheus with the wild animals builds harmoniously a Dionysian context, adding markedly funerary aspects to the composition. Ancient poetry also places centaurs as guards along the road to the chthonian world, together with Scylla, Hydra, Charybdis, Chimaera, Gorgones and Harpies (Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.287 ff.; Statius, *Thebaid*, 4.536 ff.; Statius, *Silvae*, 5.3.260 ff.). Hence the appearance of these images in the scene *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* does not contradict, but on the contrary confirms the hypothesis about its association as a sacral *topos* in the World Beyond. The figures of the centaur and of Pan/Silenus unequivocally identify the inhuman space: wild

Nature, mountains with forests and caves. Both figures combine the wild and animal features with lust, lawlessness and lack of moderation (in drinking wine) (Diod. Sic. 4.69.4). According to a fragment by Theognis, centaurs even eat raw meat (Theognis, Frg. 541; Strabo, 9.5.19 – wild people)!

The Dionysian context is not only alien to Orphism and his mythology, but the Orphic reform in the cult of Dionysus is attributed to Orpheus. The mythological versions reveal their relations controversially.

The analyses omit the circumstance that in addition to Dionysian figures, the varying compositions of the theme among the animals are intertwined with other mythological creatures indicating the World Beyond and its deforming discourse. First and foremost, the appearance of a griffin in the top right-hand corner of the mosaic from Shahba, Syria (FK117), is very impressive. The griffin is also present in the elaborate composition of animals and mythological figures in relief on the inner side of a dish with the scene of Orpheus among the animals (Köln, Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Inv. No. 166), dated to the 3rd century BC and found in a funerary context (Fol 1986, 171–175) (Fig. 6). It is placed on the second row from top to bottom, looking outward and with back



**Fig. 6.** Dish with Orpheus among the animals, Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Köln

turned to the elephant following him, while a centaur playing a double *aulos* is depicted on the next, third line.

The presence of a bird like the peacock, charged with paradisiac connotations, is much more frequently depicted in the scene: again in the mosaic from Shahba, Syria, the peacock is depicted symmetrically to the griffin, immediately above the head of Orpheus, on the left. A similar polyvalent motif can be seen in the mosaic of the Villa with the Orpheus Mosaic in Lepcis Magna (National Museum, Tripoli), where the peacock is depicted on the right, above the singer's head; the mosaic from the Woodchester Roman Villa (Gloucestershire, England), where the peacock appears on the left, immediately next to the figure of Orpheus; the mosaic from the ancient Roman city of Volubilis, Morocco. The image of the peacock on the mosaic from Blanzky-lès-Fismes (at the Musée d'art et d'archéologie du Pays de Laon, France), on the left, above the singer's head, is extremely impressive (Stern 1955, 41–77). It occupies an important place also on the top row, to the right of Orpheus, on the inner relief of the dish with Orpheus among the animals, Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Köln. The examples can be multiplied...

In addition to the above, it may be assumed that the peacock, which is very often integrated in the thematic composition of Orpheus among the animals, also indicates the World Beyond and is closely associated with the notion of Paradise on Earth and the Gardens of Eden at the end of the world.

III. The comparative analysis of the formal elements in the *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* theme and of the mosaic from Jerusalem allows making several hypothetical conclusions.

**First:** A very significant indication of the “otherness” of the depicted/described space can be seen in the violation of the order established in Nature. The appearance of exotic animals and birds (fish), their unnatural behaviour in view of their wild temper, combined with the introduction of deformed and hybrid mythological figures, as well as the behaviour of trees, rocks, waters, etc., atypical for inanimate Nature, should suggest that events have been placed Beyond the inhabited world, Beyond the boundaries of the human and inhuman (Madigan 1992, 405–416). This specific “landscape” with its specific elements can be reconstructed on the basis of a number of narrative sources, notably *The Alexander Romance*, *The Life of St. Macarius of Rome*, etc. (Lozanova 2010). The Orpheus mosaic has paradisiac connotations; it stresses the paradisiac character of this after-life and maybe therefore was taken over by some Christian communities in their early literature and art from the 2nd century AD on, but no later than the 5th/6th century.

Attention should also be focused on the circumstance that the poor literary narrative visualized in the theme analysed here, which is with funerary connotations and context in most cases, betrays a possible mysterial character with eschatological nuances and psychagogic mythology. A mystic journey to the World Beyond and the faith in the afterlife should occupy a central place in that circle of notions. It would be admissible to place hypothetically the visualization that had been transformed into a stable artistic *topos* in connection

with a possible mythological narrative about the journey of Orpheus Beyond, marked by the specific landscape of the wild, exceeding human limits, which reflect similar Christian doctrinal notions.

The **second level of analysis** outlines the functions of Orpheus as *psychopompos* guiding the dead along the Transition to the World Beyond. It would not be illogical if the monuments interpreting the mythological motif were born from concrete elements of the philosophical-religious doctrine of Orphism. Apparently, the adoption of precisely that theme in early Christian funerary art was not on account of its own significance and symbolism, but because it had been attributed to their religious ideas, and – more specifically – to their eschatology. Owing to Roman poetic art and the numerous pictorial monuments, the motif of Orpheus' *catabasis* in the chthonian world was known, where the magic power of his music defeated the forces of darkness and the rulers of death, albeit not always... The theme is depicted on several Apulian vases (Burkert 2003, 92 ff.): a krater from Altamura (350 BC: National Archaeological Museum of Naples) and a monumental Southern Italian Greek vase (330 BC) from Canossa in Apulia, Italy.

However, the theme *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* lacks the indications of the *catabasis* myth, i.e., the descent to the Kingdom of Hades! More likely, this is a reconstruction of a journey in a horizontal plan far to the East (as suggested by the exotic animals!), to the end of the world, where Paradise on Earth and the Gardens of Eden are located... Jason's first choice of Orpheus as a travel companion in the journey for the Golden Fleece was probably prompted by a mythological precedent attributing both magical powers and experience to the singer from "horse-breeding Thrace" in a journey far from civilization (Apoll. Rhod. 1.23; *Orph. Arg.* 70–71). According to some versions, one of the functions of Orpheus on the *Argo* ship, in addition to his magic powers to calm down the sea waves, the forces of Nature and the Sirens with his music, was his priestly role and the performing of rituals for the participants in the journey (Paez 2012, 38–51).

**Third**, the chronology of the spreading of the motif in pictorial art (2nd–6th centuries, with culmination in the 3rd–4th centuries) could be interpreted in the context of the process of canonization and possible reducing of some eschatological notions in the Christian doctrine.

– Christian Gnosticism flourished around the mid-2nd century, which in turn stimulated the reducing and canonization of the Christian dogmatic texts (especially after the endeavours of Marcion of Sinope with respect to creating the first known canon of Christian scriptures during the first half of the 2nd century). A large part of the doctrinal ideas of gnostic communities can be traced back to ancient Orphism and its mysterial cult forms. The theme of the influence of Orphic doctrinal ideas on gnosticism (whatever that meant!) or of the affinity between them has long been the object of in-depth research (Lozanova 2017, 61–76; see Wobbermin 1896; see Burkert 1977, 1–8). Many researchers are convinced that the ideas of the Gnostics had been preceded by those of the Orphics, and Francis Legge even identifies, albeit with a strong exaggeration, Orphism as

the earliest gnosticism, finding many features of the Orphic doctrine especially in the so-called post-Christian Gnosticism (Legge 1915, 121–148; Thomassen 2010, 463–474). The claim of the most important 3rd century theologian, Hippolytus of Rome (170–235 AD) in his work *Philosophumena sive Refutatio omnium haeresium* (*Refutation of All Heresies*), compiled ca. 230 AD, is known, namely: that the entire system of the Sethians was “woven” (συνεκάρτυσαν) by the ancient theologians Musaeus, Linus and Orpheus, who made the rituals and the mysteries particularly famous:

What is the doctrine of the Sethians, and that, purloining their theories from the wise men among the Greeks, they have patched together their own system out of shreds of opinion taken from Musæus, and Linus, and Orpheus (*Ref.* 5.4; 5.20.4–5; cf. *Iren. Adv. Haer.* 2.14.1; *Aristoph. Av.* 693–702; *Clem. Alex. Stromat.* 3.3.17; 5.14.125; Marcovich 1974, 447–451).

And elsewhere:

The entire system of their doctrine, however, is (derived) from the ancient theologians Musæus, and Linus, and Orpheus, who elucidates especially the ceremonies of initiation, as well as the mysteries themselves. For their doctrine concerning the womb is also the tenet of Orpheus; and the (idea of the) navel, which is harmony, is (to be found) with the same symbolism attached to it in the Bacchanalian orgies of Orpheus... (*Ref.* 5.15).

While Judaeoan Hellenistic literature was predominantly marked by the figure of Orpheus, gnostic texts ignored it and predominantly demonstrated structural parallels with Orphic mythology, soteriology and rituals (Stroumsa 2012, 153).

Remarkable similarity in the language, scenarios and behavioural models is noticed between the “instructions for the World Beyond” from the Orphic gold tablets and the so-called “redemption” ritual (ἀπολύτρωσις) of the followers of Marcus (Thomassen 2010, 463–473; cf. Thomassen 2006, 351–353), described in the attacks of Irenaeus in his polemic work *Against Heresies*, or *On the Detection and Overthrow of the So-Called Gnosis* (Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.21.5). The little that we know about Marcus Magus and the Marcosians, his followers, stems from Book 1 of *Adversus haereses* of Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lugdunum, now Lyon (1.13–16; 1.17–21), in the part devoted to Valentin and Valentians. Marcus was among the followers of Valentin, one of the best known Christian communities in the Roman Empire in the 2nd century (Förster 1999; Dunderberg 2012, 131–151). The comparisons are additionally provoked by two inscriptions in hexameter (CIG 4.9595a) published in 1859 by L. Fortunati (Fortunati 1859, 43 ff., n. 41; cf. Lampe 2003, 308) and dedicated to the memory of Flavia Sophe, on a marble slab found in the course of archaeological excavations of Via Latina. The inscriptions are dated between the end of the 2nd and the first half of the 3rd century (Guarducci 1983, 353–379; 366–370). G. Quispel convincingly identifies Flavia as belonging to the Christian community of Valentians. The epitaph attests the practice of providing passwords to the initiated individual,

which would guarantee them unimpeded return to God's kingdom (Iren. *Haer.* 1.21.4–5):

Yearning for the light of the Father, my Sophe, sister and spouse,  
anointed in the baths of Christ with imperishable sacred myron,  
you were eager to gaze at the divine faces of aeons,  
the great angel of the great counsel, the true Son,  
you entered the bridal chamber and into the bosom  
of the Father you leapt, immortal [. . .].

(cited after Thomassen 2010, 464)

Einar Thomassen defines three starting points for comparisons between the Orphic instructions on the World Beyond and Valentinian's ritual:

(1) a similar scenario for questioning by the forces of the World Beyond; (2) declaration by the deceased individual about their divine origin and nature; and (3) citing an earlier initiation rite that assured the deceased person of their divine nature, made them immortal and gave them knowledge needed to surmount the obstacles faced after death, and to give correct answers to the questions posed (Thomassen 2010, 467).

According to E. Thomassen (Thomassen 2010, 467), "...the post mortem encounters described in the Gnostic texts cannot be totally independent of those Graeco-Roman traditions where these kinds of exchanges already are an established *topos* in accounts of the afterlife journey". Naturally, the attitude of those notions and their fragmentary literary manifestations to concrete religious communities and their cult activities was hardly direct. The poetic words attributed to Orpheus constitute a literary tradition that is difficult to identify unequivocally with "Orphism" as a practical religious reality, as well as the mythology around his figure to which literary characteristics have been attributed.

Stephen L. Young also sees a typological similarity of language and content in a precise comparative analysis of the texts of the Orphic gold tablets and the so-called "Redemption" rite (*ἀπολύτρωσις*) of the followers of Marcus (Young 2016, 77–110). Irenaeus writes about Marcus and the Marcosians as being active around the mid-2nd century in Gaul (1.13.7) and in Asia Minor (1.13.5). He differed from the Valentinians by being presented as the founder of a cult society, *thiasos*, and by being accused of sorcery and lack of morals. According to Irenaeus (*Haer.* 1.13.4–5), he made love potions and seduced the Christian women. Thus, according to the Bishop of Lyon, Marcus seduced the wife of a deacon and she wandered for a long time with him. It seems that women had a special place in his community, because he offered to them the miracle of making prophecies, although they had never done that earlier. Irenaeus remarks spitefully:

It appears probable enough that this man possesses a demon as his familiar spirit, by means of whom he seems able to prophesy, and also enables as many as he counts worthy to be partakers of his Charis themselves to prophesy. He devotes himself *especially to women, and those such as are well-bred, and elegantly attired, and of great wealth, whom he frequently seeks to draw after him...* (*Haer.* 1.13.3).

That specific role of women who “*are well-bred, and elegantly attired, and of great wealth*”, as well as the perceived similarity in psychagogic mythology, allow the assumption in purely hypothetical terms that the two women Theodosia and Georgia, who were buried in the tomb with the Orpheus Funerary Mosaic from Jerusalem, belonged perhaps to the community of the Marcosians from the Valentinians, whereby both they and their relatives who took care of their post mortem journey, read the scene *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* precisely as an archaic illustration of what awaited them after the end of their journey on Earth.

Gnosticism comprised numerous different dualistic teachings and mysterial sects that flourished precisely in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, prior to its decline in the 4th century and its blending with other movements. The reign of Emperor Julian (361–363 AD) was the last period of religious tolerance to heathenistic and heretic ideas. Emperor Valentinian (371 AD) prohibited the public cult of the Manicheans (Chuvin 1990, 50–51). After him the emperor’s crown passed on to Theodosius I, who aggressively issued at least 15 antiheretic laws in the decade that followed (*Theodosian Code*, 1, 16. Tit. v. leg. 6–23). Around that time texts in the Nag Hammadi collection were also buried, and the images of Orpheus with the wild beasts occurred less and less frequently in a Christian context. The period between the 2nd and the 3rd centuries was also the time of the most intensive propagation of the pictorial theme.

– in the 6th century, the Eastern Roman Empire was shaken by intensive religious debates and controversy, which seriously threatened internal peace. The numerous sects and schismatics mercilessly destroyed the unity of the State. More than thirty religious communities were attested in the Empire in the 6th century, and paganism – in spite of the legislative restrictions – still retained its positions even among the aristocratic elite of Roman society (Constantelos 1964, 372–380, espec. 372; Meyendorff 1989, 207–250). Emperor Justinian (ca. 482 – 14 November 565 AD), following in the footsteps of Constantine the Great, directed his policy (Durant 1972, 21–49) towards overcoming the religious differences and conflicts with a view to establishing religious unity (Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History*, p. 198), but through legislative restrictions and under the motto “one empire, one faith, one church”. From the very beginning of his rule he promulgated with a law the faith of the Church in the Trinity and Incarnation (Cod. I.1.7; *Codex Justiniani*; Novellae, cxxxi) and threatened all heretics with the respective punishments (Cod. I.1.5), and declared subsequently that he intended to deprive all who disturbed Orthodoxy of the possibility to commit such a crime through due process (MPG, lxxxvi.1, p. 993; Justinian’s theological treatises are published in *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 86 Migne). A number of sources bear evidence of the severity with which pagans and schismatics were excluded from the socium, their books were burned and the statues of their gods – destroyed... In 529 AD, the Athenian Academy was closed down and the teachers in it sought refuge beyond the borders of the Empire. The persecutions and the confiscations of property continued until the end of the 6th century (Joannes Lydus, *De Magistratibus*, 267; Joannes Malalas, *Chronographia*, 491, 449; Theophanis, *Chronographia*, 276; Agatinas, *Epigrammata*, 131 and 133, etc.). Again at the same time, Justinian prohibited the Sect of the Montanists.

From the 4th century onward, the Valentinians were subjected to persecutions not only by the legislative policy of the Roman emperors, but also by the actual Christian communities. Even at the end of the 7th century, new decrees against them were issued at the Second Council of Trullo (692 AD), which testifies to their exceptional resilience.

Those processes in the Eastern Roman Empire could be associated with the end of the functioning of the theme and pictorial scene *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* and with the waning of the ideas suggested with it.

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