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Orpheus and Eurydice

Ovid¹ tells the story of Orpheus and Eurydice as follows (*Metamorphoses* 10. 1-85, 11. 1-66):



Orpheus, Roman mosaic, ca. 4th Century C.E.

Hymen, god of marriage, wrapped in his saffron-colored cloak, left the wedding of Iphis and Ianthe² and made his way through the vast tracts of air to the shores of the Thracian Cicones³, he came at the call of Orpheus, but in vain, for although he was to be sure present at the marriage of Orpheus to Eurydice, he did not smile or bless the pair or give good omens. Even the torch he held kept sputtering with smoke that drew tears and would not burn despite vigorous shaking.

The outcome was even more serious than this ominous beginning. For while the new bride was wandering through the grass accompanied by a band of Naiads⁴, she was bitten on the ankle by a serpent and collapsed in death.

After Orpheus, the bard of the Thracian mountains, had wept his

¹ Publius Ovidius Naso (known as Ovid) (43 B.C.E. - ca. 17 C.E.): Roman poet noted for his elegiac love poems (such as the *Amores* and the *Ars Amatoria*) and for the *Metamorphoses*, a hexametric series of tales of mythological, legendary, and historical figures

² According to Ovid, Iphis was the daughter of Telethusa and Ligdus in Crete. Ligdus had already threatened to kill his pregnant wife's child if it wasn't a boy. Telethusa despaired, but is visited in the middle of the night by the Egyptian goddess Isis, attended by Anubis and Apis, who assures her that all will be well. When Telethusa gives birth to Iphis, she conceals her daughter's sex from her husband and raises her daughter as a boy. Iphis falls in love with another girl, Ianthe. Iphis is deeply in love and prays to Juno to allow her to marry her beloved. When nothing happens, her mother Telethusa brings her to the temple of Isis and prays to the goddess to help her daughter. Isis responds by transforming Iphis into a man. The male Iphis marries Ianthe and the two live happily ever after. Their marriage is presided over by Juno, Venus, and Hymen, the god of marriage.

³ Thrace is a historical and geographic region in southeast Europe bounded by the Balkan Mountains on the north, Rhodope Mountains and the Aegean Sea on the south, and by the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara on the east. The areas it comprises are southeastern Bulgaria (Northern Thrace), northeastern Greece (Western Thrace), and the European part of Turkey (Eastern Thrace).

⁴ nymphs (female divine spirits who animate nature) who presided over fountains, wells, springs, streams, and brooks

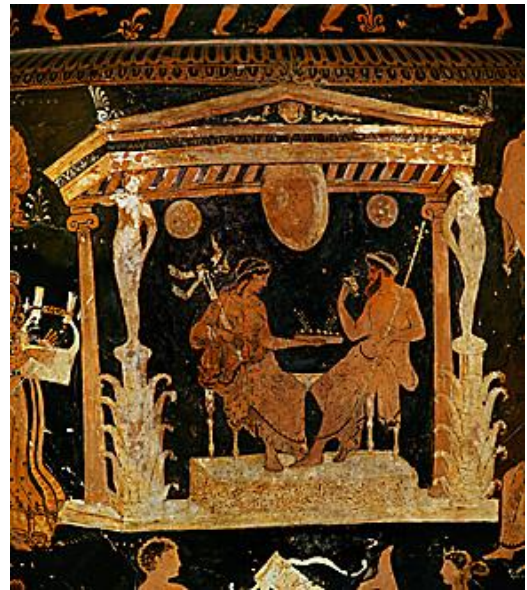


Orpheus playing for Hades and Persephone, Greek vase, ca. 350 B.C.E.

fill to the breezes of the upper world, he dared to descend to Styx⁵ by the entrance near Taenarus so that he might rouse the shades⁶. Past the tenuous multitudes of ghosts beyond the grave, he approached Persephone⁷ and her lord⁸, who rule this unlovely realm of shadows, and sang his song as he plucked the strings of his lyre⁹: "O deities of the world below the earth, into which all of us who are mortal return, if it is right and you allow me to utter the truth, laying aside evasion and falsehood, I did not come down to see the realms of Tartarus¹⁰ or to bind the triple neck, bristling with serpents, of the monstrous hound descended from Medusa¹¹; the cause of my journey is my wife; she stepped on a snake, and its venom coursing through her veins stole from her the bloom

of her years. I wanted to be able to endure, and I admit that I have tried; but Love has conquered. He is a god who is well known in the world above; I suspect that he is famous even here as well (although I do not know for sure); if the story of the rape of long ago is not a lie, Love also brought you two together¹².

By these places full of fear, by this yawning Chaos, and by the silent vastness of this kingdom, reweave I pray the thread of Eurydice's destiny cut off too soon! We pay everything to you, and after tarrying but a little while we hasten more slowly



Hades and Persephone, same vase

⁵ one of the rivers in the underworld, also called Hades (after the god who presides over it)

⁶ [authors' footnote] One of the many places identified as an entrance to the Underworld was a cave near Taenarus, a town in Laconia.

⁷ the daughter of Zeus and the harvest goddess Demeter, and queen of the underworld; she was abducted by Hades, the king of the underworld to be his bride

⁸ i.e., Hades, god of the dead

⁹ a stringed musical instrument known for its use in Greek classical antiquity; similar in appearance to a harp, it was typically strummed (like a guitar or zithar) rather than plucked (like a harp)

¹⁰ a deep, gloomy place, a pit, or an abyss used as a dungeon of torment and suffering that resides beneath the underworld

¹¹ i.e., Cerberus, a multi-headed hound (usually three-headed) which guards the gates of the Underworld

¹² see note 7

or more quickly to this one abode. All of us direct our course here, this is our very last home, and you hold the longest sway over the human race. Eurydice too, when she in her ripe age has gone through the just allotment of her years, will fall under your power; I ask as a gift her return to me. If the Fates refuse this reprieve for my wife, it is sure that I do not wish to return either. Take joy in the death of us both!"

As he made this plea and sang his words to the tune of his lyre, the bloodless spirits wept; Tantalus¹³ stopped reaching for the receding waters, the wheel of Ixion¹⁴ stopped in wonder, the vultures ceased tearing at the liver of Tityus¹⁵, the Danaid descendants of



the god Hermes with Orpheus and Eurydice, Roman relief (copy of a Greek original from the 5th Century B.C.E.)

Belus¹⁶ left their urns empty, and you, O Sisyphus¹⁷, sat on your stone. Then for the first time, the story has it, the cheeks of the Eumenides¹⁸ were moist with tears as they were overcome by his song, and the king who rules these lower regions and his regal wife could not endure his pleas or their refusal. They called Eurydice; she was among the more recent shades and she approached, her step slow because of her wound. Thracian Orpheus took her and with her the command that he not turn back his gaze until he had left the groves of Avernus¹⁹, or the gift would be revoked.

Through the mute silence, they wrest their steep way, arduous, dark, and thick with black vapors. They were not far from the border of the world above, here frightened that she might not be well and yearning to see her with his own eyes, through love he turned and looked, and with his gaze she slipped away and down. He stretched out his arms, struggling to

¹³ a wicked king and son of Zeus; condemned in Hades to stand in water that receded when he tried to drink and beneath fruit that receded when he reached for it

¹⁴ a king who, by Zeus's command, was pinned to a fiery wheel that revolved unceasingly through the underworld, as punishment for his alleged seduction of Hera

¹⁵ son of Zeus, a giant who attempted to violate Leto, mother of Apollo; in Tartarus, Tityus was stretched out on the ground eternally, while two vultures ate his liver

¹⁶ the reference is obscure, perhaps referring to a tale no longer extant; Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (4.212f) elsewhere speaks of King Orchamus who ruled the Achaemenid cities of Persia as the seventh in line from ancient Belus the founder, but no other extant sources mentions either Orchamus or his daughters Leucothoe and Clytie

¹⁷ son of Aeolus, punished in Hades for his misdeeds in life by being condemned to the eternal task of rolling a large stone to the top of a hill, from which it always rolled down again

¹⁸ name given to the Furies, hideous snake-haired monsters (usually three in number) who pursued unpunished criminals

¹⁹ Roman equivalent to the Greek Hades (another name for the underworld, not the god Hades who presides over it), to which the lake Avernus was supposed to be the entrance

embrace and be embraced, but unlucky and unhappy he grasped nothing but the limp and yielding breezes. Now as Eurydice was dying for a second time, she did not reproach her husband; for what complaint should she have except that she was loved? She uttered for the very last time a farewell that barely reached his ears and fell back once more to the same place.

At the second death of his wife, Orpheus was stunned ... The ferryman²⁰ kept Orpheus back as he begged in vain, wishing to cross over once again; yet he remained seated on the bank for seven days, unkempt and without food, the gift of Ceres²¹; anxiety, deep grief, and



Orpheus and Euridice (ca. 1868) by George Frederic Watts

tears were his nourishment as he bewailed the cruelty of the gods of Erebus²². He then withdrew to the mountains of Thrace, Rhodope, and wind-swept Haemus. Three times the Titan sun had rounded out the year with the sign of watery Pisces²³, and Orpheus the while had fled from love with all women, either because of his previous woe or because he had made a pledge. Many women were seized with passion for union with the bard and many in anguish were repulsed. He was the originator for the Thracian peoples of turning to the love of young boys and of enjoying the brief spring of their youth and plucking its first flowers ...

While the Thracian bard was inducing the woods, the rocks, and the hearts of the wild beasts to follow him, Ciconian women²⁴, their frenzied breasts clad in animal skins, spied Orpheus from the top of

²⁰ Charon, an old man who ferried the souls of the dead across the Styx and Acheron rivers to Hades

²¹ goddess of grain and agriculture

²² son of a primordial god, Chaos, and represented the personification of darkness and shadow, which filled in all the corners and crannies of the world

²³ a large constellation (the Fish or Fishes), said to represent a pair of fish tied together by their tails

²⁴ a Thracian tribe; these women are Maenads (see note 26), described as having "Bacchic shrieks" a few lines later

a hill as he was singing to his lyre. One of them, her hair tossing in the light breeze, exclaimed, "Ah look, here is the one who despises us." And she hurled her weapon, wreathed with foliage, straight at the face of Apollo's son²⁵ as he sang, and it made its mark but did not wound. The weapon of another was a stone, which as it hurtled was overcome in midair by the harmony of voice and lyre and fell prone at his feet like a suppliant apologizing for so furious an assault. But their hostility grew more bold, and restraint



Maenads attacking Orpheus, Greek vase, ca. 4th Century B.C.E.

was abandoned until the Fury of madness held absolute sway. All weapons would have been softened by his song, but the great clamor, the Phrygian flutes with their curved pipes, the drums, the pounding, and the Bacchic shrieks drowned out the sound of his lyre.

Then at last the stones that could not hear grew red with the blood of the poet. But first the Maenads²⁶ seized the hordes or birds still spell-bound by the singer's voice, the serpents, and the throng of beasts, all testimonies to the triumph of his song. And then they turned with bloody hands

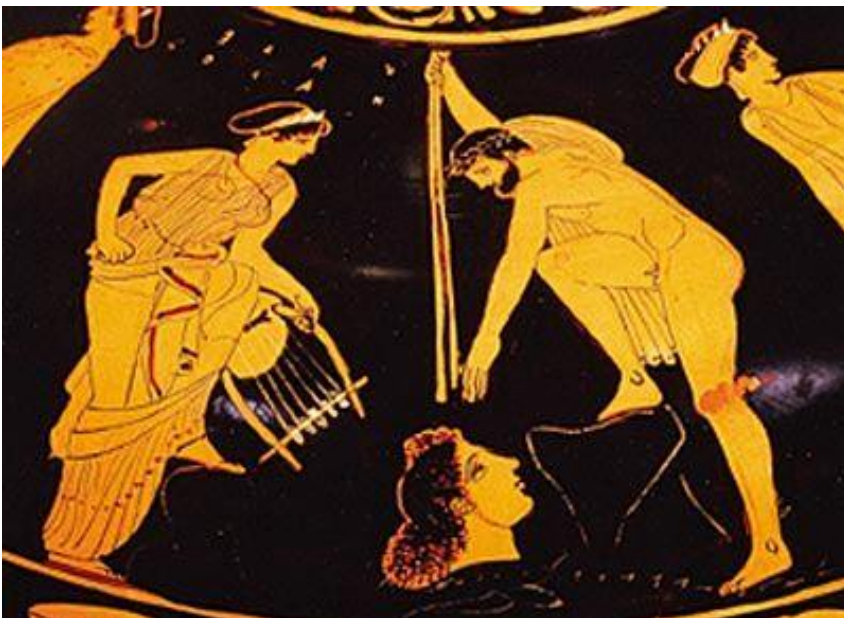
on Orpheus himself, like birds that throng together if at any time they see the owl of night abroad by day. They made for the bard, just as the stag about to die is prey for the dogs in the morning sand of the amphitheater, and they flung the verdant leafy thyrsus²⁷, not made for such deadly purpose. Some hurled clods of earth, others branches ripped from trees, still others stones.

²⁵ Orpheus's father was Oeagrus, a Thracian king according to most versions of the myth, though some claim he was the son of Apollo, a god of music, poetic inspiration, archery, prophecy, medicine, pastoral life, and, in later poetry, the sun; whether Ovid means this to be taken as a literal or figurative relationship is unclear

²⁶ The Maenads are the female followers of Dionysus (Bacchus in the Roman pantheon-- a god of the grape harvest, winemaking and wine, of ritual madness and ecstasy), the most significant members of the Thiasus, the god's retinue. Their name literally translates as "raving ones". Often the maenads were portrayed as inspired by him into a state of ecstatic frenzy, through a combination of dancing and drunken intoxication. In this state, they would lose all self-control, begin shouting excitedly, engage in uncontrolled sexual behavior, and ritualistically hunt down and tear to pieces animals-- and, in myth at least, sometimes men and children-- devouring the raw flesh. During these rites, the maenads would dress in fawn skins and carry a *thyrsus*, a long stick wrapped in ivy or vine leaves and tipped by a cluster of leaves; they would weave ivy-wreaths around their heads, and often handle or wear snakes.

²⁷ see note 26

So that weapons might not be wanting for their fury, it happened that oxen were working the earth, yoked to the ploughshare; and nearby sturdy farmers were digging the hard fields with much sweat preparing for the harvest. When they saw the throng, they fled leaving behind the tools with which they worked. Hoes, heavy mattocks, and long rakes lay scattered through the empty fields. The madwomen snatched them up; and after they had torn apart the oxen that threatened with their horns, they rushed back again to mete out the poet's fate. In their sacrilege they destroyed him as he stretched out his hands and spoke then for the first time in vain with a voice that touched no one. And through that mouth, which was heard, god knows, by stones and understood by bestial senses, his soul breathed forth receding on the winds.



the head of Orpheus washed up upon the shores of Lesbos (the head is depicted as alive and delivering prophetic utterances), Attic vase, ca. 450 B.C.E.

For you, O Orpheus, for you the trees let fall their leaves and shorn of foliage made lament. They say too that rivers swelled with their own tears, and the Naiads and Dryads²⁸ changed their robes to black and wore their hair dishevelled. His limbs lie scattered in various places; his head and lyre you got, O river Hebrus, and-- O wonder-- while they floated in midstream, the lyre made some plaintive lamentation, I know not what, the lifeless tongue murmured laments too, and

the banks lamented in reply. And then they left his native Thracian river and were carried out to sea, until they reached Methymna on the island of Lesbos. Here they were washed ashore on foreign sands, and a savage snake made for the mouth and hair soaked with the dripping foam. At last Phoebus Apollo²⁹ appeared and stopped the serpent as it prepared to make its bite and froze hard its open mouth and gaping jaws, just as they were, in stone.

The shade of Orpheus went down below the earth and recognized all the places he had seen before; he looked amid the fields of the pious and found Eurydice, and clasped her in his eager arms. Here now they walk together side by side, sometimes he follows her as she

²⁸ see note 4; dryads were nymphs inhabiting forests or a trees

²⁹ see note 25

precedes, sometimes he goes ahead and safely now looks back at his Eurydice.

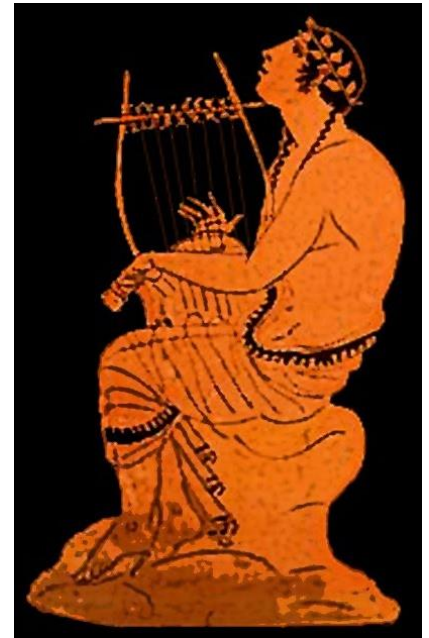
As Ovid continues the story, we learn that Bacchus was distressed at the loss of the poet who sang his mysteries; he punished the Thracian women by turning them into trees and then abandoned Thrace all together.

The other major classical version of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice is Vergil's³⁰. Most, but not all, of the details are similar, although the poetic timbre is different. According to Vergil, Eurydice stepped on the snake while running away from the unwelcome advances of Aristaeus³¹. Thus Ovid and Vergil represent the tradition for the tragic story of music, enchantment, love, and death that has been recreated again and again with imagination, beauty, and profundity whether it be in an opera by Gluck or a movie by Cocteau.

Life of Orpheus, Religious Poet and Musician

There is another very important side to Orpheus' character, of which we can only catch glimpses today because of the inadequacy of our evidence. Orpheus was considered the founder of a religion, a prophet (*theologos*) who with his priests and disciples committed to writing holy words (*hieroi logoi*) that provided a bible for dogma, ritual, and behavior. Variations and inconsistencies in the tradition make it difficult to know this Orpheus and his religion precisely, but the general nature of their character and development can be discerned, despite the frustrating contradictions and obscurities.' Some of the significant "facts" that can be isolated from the diverse accounts are as follows.

Orpheus' home was in Thrace, his mother was one of the Muses, usually Calliope; his father was either Oeagrus, a Thracian river-god, or the great god Apollo, whom he followed. He wooed and won Eurydice, a Dryad, by the charm of his music. When she died, he went to Hades to fetch her but failed. Orpheus was one of the members



Orpheus, Greek vase, ca. 5th Century B.C.E.

³⁰ Publius Vergilius Maro (known as Virgil or Vergil) (70 - 19 B.C.E.): a classical Roman poet, best known for three major works-- the *Eclogues* (or *Bucolics*), the *Georgics*, and the *Aeneid*; his version of the Orpheus myth occurs in *Georgics* 4:452-526

³¹ [authors' footnote]: Aristaeus, the son of Apollo and Cyrene, is the traditional hero or deity of rustic pursuits, especially beekeeping. When Eurydice died, her sister Dryads in their grief and anger caused all the bees of Aristaeus to die. Perplexed at this, he eventually consulted the wise old man of the sea, Proteus. Aristaeus appeased the nymphs, and a new swarm of bees was created. Through the role of Aristaeus, Vergil artfully introduces the touching account of Orpheus and Eurydice in the last book of his didactic poem on farming.

of Jason's Argonautic expedition³². He had a son or a pupil, Musaeus, who assumed many of the characteristics of Orpheus himself. Among the versions of his death, several prove interesting in the quest for the historical religious teacher. He is said to have been struck down by the thunderbolt of Zeus because in his mysteries he taught things unknown before; he also is said to have died through a conspiracy of his countrymen, who would not accept his teachings.

The common tradition (which both Ovid and Vergil reflect) makes the women of Thrace responsible for his death. But the reasons for their hostility vary: they were angry because he neglected them after the death of Eurydice, or refused to initiate them into his mysteries, or enticed their husbands away from them. Sometimes the women are followers of Dionysus, expressly directed against Orpheus by their god, for Dionysus in his attempts to convert Thrace to his religion met the opposition of Orpheus, a devoted follower of Apollo the sun-god, and sent his Maenads to tear the bard to pieces. According to some, the fragments of his body were buried by his mother and sister Muses in Thrace or in the region of Mt. Olympus. His head and lyre were claimed by Lesbos (as already explained by Ovid), where a shrine was erected in his honor. The head became an oracular source, but its prophecies were suppressed by Apollo. A temple of Bacchus was built over the spot where the head was buried.

The chronological tradition for Orpheus' career as musician and religious teacher is equally muddled. Those who connect his dates with Homer's deserve the most credibility. Thus either he was the inventor of writing and his works immediately preceded the Homeric epics, or Homer was the first poet and Orpheus followed shortly after.

In these conflicting speculations, a fundamental and puzzling duality is evident. Orpheus is linked in one way or another to both Apollo and Dionysus. Was there a real Orpheus, a missionary in Thrace who met his death violently? Did he champion Apollo against Dionysus or Dionysus against Apollo? Did he compromise and adapt the religion of the oriental Dionysus to that of Hellenic Apollo, taking from both



Maenad carrying a thyrsus and a panther, Attic drinking cup, ca. 490-480 B.C.E.

³² a late ancient Greek mythological hero from the late 10th Century B.C.E., famous as the leader of the Argonauts and their quest for the Golden Fleece

and preaching a message that was new and convincing, at least to some?

However one would like to interpret the evidence, this duality cannot be ignored. The music, magic, and prophecy suggest Apollo, as does the championship of civilization, but Apollo silenced the oracle of Orpheus, whose sermon of gentleness and peace has none of the violence of the archer-god. On the other hand, Orpheus' music is the antithesis of the clashing din of Bacchus; and the tales of his misogyny could imply a religion that at some period was confined to men, in contrast to the worship of Dionysus with its appeal to women. At the same time, Orphic initiation and mysteries are by their very nature Dionysiac. Other elements in the legends of both Orpheus and Dionysus are strikingly parallel: Orpheus is torn to pieces like Dionysus himself (at the hands of the Titans), or like Pentheus³³, who also opposed the god and met destruction at the hands of his Maenads. Like Orpheus, Dionysus descended to the Underworld, in his case to fetch his mother Semele; indeed, a less common variant has Orpheus successful (like Dionysus) in his pursuit of Eurydice³⁴.



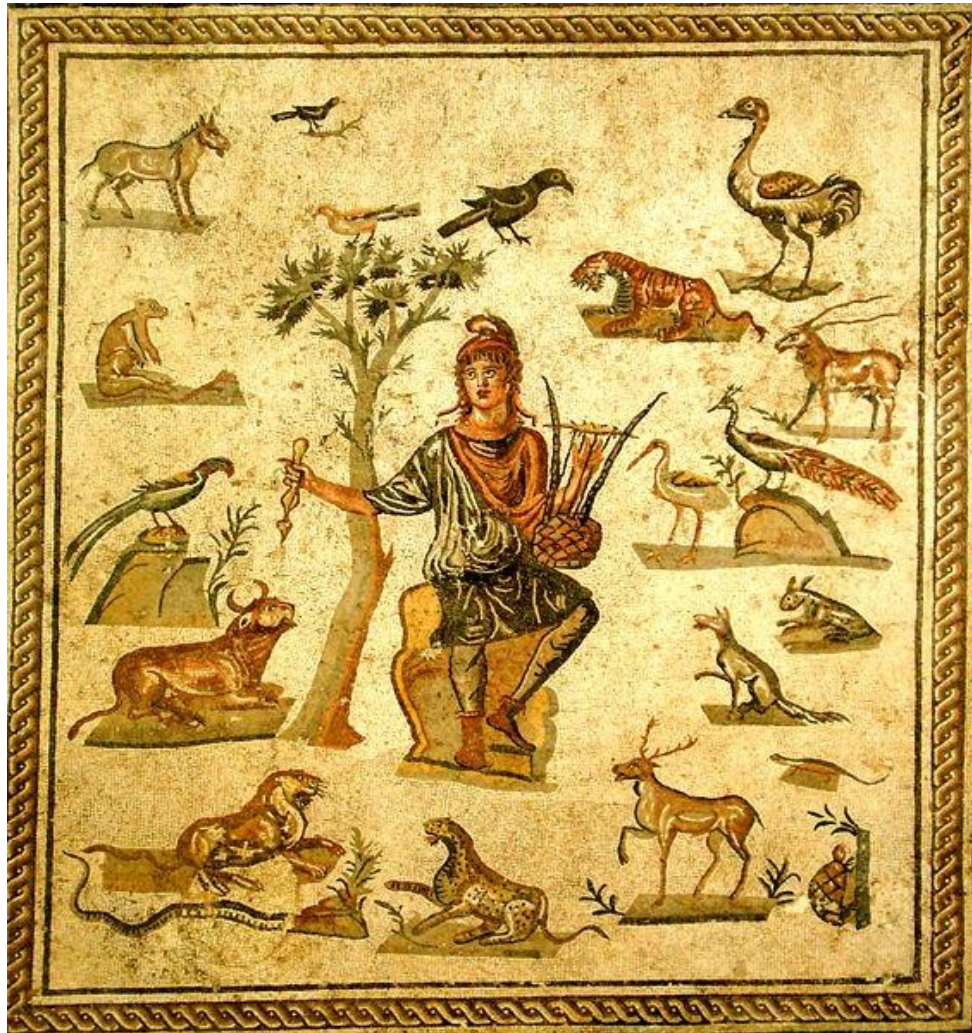
Dionysus (Bacchus), Roman marble (from Greek original), ca. 2nd Century C.E.

There is nevertheless a well-established tradition that the historic Orpheus was not a god but a hero who lived, suffered, and died; his tomb was sacred, and he had a cult. He was in this view a prophet, a priest, or if you like, a saint, whose god was Apollo or Dionysus or both. Such a belief is ultimately subjective; but by the fifth century he was accepted as a human religious teacher, whose doctrine was communicated in sacred writings

³³ A king of Thebes, Pentheus banned the worship of the god Dionysus, who was the son of his aunt Semele, and did not allow the women of Cadmeia to join in his rites. An angered Dionysus caused Pentheus' mother Agave and his aunts, Ino and Autonoë, along with all the other women of Thebes, to rush to Mount Cithaeron in a Bacchic frenzy. Because of this, Pentheus imprisoned Dionysus, but his chains fell off and the jail doors opened for him. Dionysus then lured Pentheus out to spy on the Bacchic rites. The daughters of Cadmus saw him in a tree and thought him to be a wild animal. Pentheus was pulled down and torn limb from limb by them (as part of a ritual known as the *sparagmos*), causing them to be exiled from Thebes. Some say that his own mother tore his head.

³⁴ [authors' footnote]: This link with Dionysus may mean that Orpheus is yet another god (however faded) of the death and rebirth of vegetation; Eurydice, too, has some of the chthonian characteristics of Semele and Persephone. These parallels could likewise have been added to the legend that grew up about a historical prophet. Some of the themes also look like motifs common to folktale: conjugal devotion, the journey to Hades' realm, the tabu of looking back.

attributed to him and believed to be much earlier in time. Tablets were said to be found in the mountains of Thrace inscribed with his writing, prescribing potent charms, incantations, and spells. In the fourth century, Plato³⁵ quotes hexameter lines of Orpheus and tells of priests who preached his message of salvation. Later, Orpheus is credited with songs about the gods and the origin of all things. The hymns that have come down to us under Orpheus' name were given their present form in the early centuries of our era; in fact this corpus of Orphic Hymns may have been composed (rather than compiled) in the second or third century A.D. It is of little help for reconstructing early Orphic doctrine.



Orpheus, Roman mosaic, ca. 3rd Century C.E.

³⁵ Plato (ca.429 - ca.347 B.C.E.): Greek philosopher; disciple of Socrates and the teacher of Aristotle; he founded the Academy in Athens