



ACCORD EUR-OPA
RISQUES MAJEURS

AP/CAT (94) 21

Les temps de l'Europe

Tome II

Temps mythiques européens

QUATRIEME ATELIER EUROPEEN P.A.C.T.-EURETHNO
DELPHE, SEPTEMBRE 1992

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STRASBOURG 1994

THE JOURNEY TO THE UNDERWORLD

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When, following the defeat of Kronos, the three great gods shared out the powers, the kingdom of the Underworld was allotted to Hades¹, who became sovereign in the land of the dead and was later worshipped under the name of Pluton². Opinions vary as to where his kingdom lay; some place it at the edge of the ocean³ and others in the depths of the earth, which is the most prevalent view. Souls reached Hades' enclosed domain accompanied by Hermes Leader of Souls (Psychopompos), "travelling in Charon's boat", over the River Acheron and the Acherousian Lake. Hades' queen consort was Persephone, daughter of Demeter, whom the god had violently abducted to his gloomy realm. In addition to the two major deities in the Underworld there were other minor, sullen ones, all "inexpiable" and thus burdened with all mortal hatred. In order to mollify them the living performed various sacred rites, particularly in certain regions where the so-called "mouths of Hades" were located. Sanctuaries were founded there too in order to summon the souls of the dead, whose assistance was sought by mortals. Through these mouths certain gods and heroes were able to descend to Hades and to return to the world of the living.

Numerous mythological accounts refer to the descents to Hades by gods and heroes of ancient Greece⁴. Among the most familiar descents of divine figures are that of Persephone and of Dionysos, and of mortal heroes, of Herakles, Theseus, Peirithos, Odysseus and Orpheus. It was far easier for the gods to descend to Hades' kingdom⁵. Yet their journey to the Underworld could not be accomplished without some direction. They required a guide, and indeed a mortal (who knew more since death was concealed within him) to show them the way⁶. They were always obliged to give something in exchange, just as mortals paid the ferryman's fee with a coin⁷.

The journey to the Underworld is closely connected with concepts concerning life after death, the belief that the soul lives on after the destruction of the body, as well as with man's desire to learn as much as he can about the continuity of life.

Better known in ancient Greece were the descents of heroes, the most widely propagated of which was that of Herakles. Indeed this made him the most popular of the heroes, for he put his strength in the service of mortals, endeavouring to relieve them not only of the malign elements dominating the world of the living, but also of the fear of the dark forces residing in the "kingdom of Hades". This fear was particularly intense in Late Geometric times, and especially in the Archaic period when new cultural models prevailed⁸.

Orpheus' descent into Hades, to bring back his beloved wife Eurikide, is equally well known.

In both these instances Hades showed understanding and cooperated. This was not the case, however, when Theseus and his friend Peirithos entered Hades in order to capture Persephone, whom Peirithos, so myth relates, wanted to make his wife⁹. It is worth mentioning that in later times, when new cultural models were established¹⁰, the Athenians created new versions for their eponymous hero, in their efforts to project him as "an exemplar of virtue and morality", and to free him of the charge of the descent into Hades in order to capture Persephone¹¹.

Analogous with the other heroes was Odysseus' descent into Hades, narrated with prolixity in the *Odyssey*¹². The hero met the souls of many eponymous men and women, so many that he was frightened and hastily quit the kingdom of the dead, afearred that he might, in the end, invoke the wrath of the gods and remain forever in the land of shades.

It should be observed that although Hades was identified as the place where souls were chastized after death, in mythical tradition no distinction is made between the just and the unjust. All go to the same place, where each is rewarded or punished according to its deserts. This also obtains for depictions of the Underworld¹³. In their representations of Pluton's kingdom, vase-painters made no distinction between the innocent and the sinful, while Hades was usually depicted with Persephone at the centre of the scene, seated on an elaborate throne.

These representations reinforced the new teachings which established a new model of faith, aimed at emphasizing the unpleasant consequences of sin, as well as at explaining to the general public that the "temporal happiness of the corrupt" was not acceptable to the gods, who punished them after death. Thus the contrivance of the journey to the Underworld acquired a didactic character, making "the horror of hell real and vivid in the imagination". In the Archaic period the sacred Orphic books predicted punishments for the uninitiated and rewards for the initiated in Hades¹⁴. Likewise popular in this period were passages commemorating the punishments of the impious and the rewards of the righteous, who also lived in blessed meadows during their descent into Hades. These are the so called *Descents into Hades*, one of which was attributed to Orpheus himself.

The descriptions of the dangers encountered by the heroes in the course of their descent, as they penetrated the dark kingdom of Hades, passing among evil daemons, make the readings particularly fascinating and exciting; the greater the dangers the heroes faced, the greater their enchantment. These descents echoed prevalent beliefs and were associated with new ideas on life after death and the reciprocal influence between the world of the living and that of the dead. Plato was much influenced by these precepts¹⁵.

More generally, it should be mentioned that the mythical theme of the journey to the Underworld was a source of inspiration for many plays in the ancient Greek dramatic repertoire and in later times, thus exerting an influence on Byzantine and Postbyzantine literature¹⁶, and ultimately on the literature of the West.

More specifically, with regard to Christian tradition, and in particular that of the Orthodox Church, it should be noted that a clear distinction

is made between the place where moral rewards and punishments are meted out to the souls in Hades. However, in contrast to the descents of antiquity, a journey "in corpore" to the Underworld is not acceptable. With the exception of Christ, who triumphed over Death, the only person who descended into Hades is the Virgin, in whom "the power to vanquish Hades and Death was recognized"¹⁷.

Though there are numerous texts, canonical and apocryphal, narrating a visit to the "Netherworld" - mainly of martyrs or *hosioi* - the journey was only made in dream and they were usually accompanied by an angel.

On her journey to the Underworld the Virgin was also led by an angel, the Archangel Michael, who is considered to be the Leader of Souls.

The *Apocalypse of the Virgin*, as the description of her journey to the Underworld in order to intercede for the salvation of sinners is known, circulated in many versions¹⁸ and was a widely disseminated tract in Greece. It exerted considerable influence on both concepts of life after death and on human behaviour. In its effort to establish new models of life it brandishing the fear of tortures in Hell with the tragic descriptions of the life of sinners there¹⁹.

The *Apocalypse of the Virgin* circulated in small pamphlets, mainly manuscripts. The content of most versions is virtually the same, though there are minor differences.

A version of the *Apocalypse* from the island of Kythera²⁰ was distributed as a booklet entitled *The Apocalypse of the Virgin when she went to Hades and saw the souls of the sinful, where they are damned*. The text, clearly didactic in character, is full of spelling mistakes. Its author either copied some original or set down his knowledge of the subject from oral tradition. In many places the influence of local lore is obvious, while there is a curious mixture of folk and learned elements. As is the case in other versions too, the writer is fully conversant with ecclesiastical lore. In general it seeks to project the punishment of the laity and of unworthy clerics, for whom the Virgin only succeeded in getting temporary redemption.

The content of the text is briefly the following: Shortly before her ascent to Heaven the Virgin goes to the Mount of Olives to pray and asks the Archangel Michael to lead her to Hell that she might see the sinners. The archangel appears with a retinue of 400 angels. He addresses a series of laudatory salutations to the Virgin, then receives hers, after which they depart on the journey. On the Virgin's suggestion they first go to the "wooded parts where the lioness roams". There they behold those being punished because they did not keep God's commandments. They continue on to "Tartarus" where the darkness is great and where those who did not believe in the Holy Trinity and did not acknowledge the Virgin as the Mother of God are punished.

Next the Virgin and the Angels go northwards, to the River of Fire, where immersed in flames, some to the knees, some to the waist, the chest, the neck, and others to the "top" are those who disobeyed or insulted their parents, or who wasted their parents' substance without giving alms and who neglected to hold remembrance services for their parents' soul. Here too are punished those who squandered their money in debauch (with whores), those who ate "unclean food", those who did not honour

their teachers, those who killed their children born out of wedlock, those who tortured their brothers and put them to death. In another part of the River of Fire, hanging from their arms and their legs, are usurers, calumniators and gossipers, and seducers of women who lead them into adultery. The details of the punishments are spine-chilling. Men and women who "cursed" and "beat the priests" sit on burning stools, while lying on a burning bed are those who did not attend church on Sunday but preferred to sleep. Hanging from their tongue on the iron trees of Hell are blasphemers, slanderers, those who bore false-witness, whores, adulterers and robbers. A church warden and a monastery steward who embezzled the income of the church property hang from their nails, their tongue bound, while from his twenty fingers and toes, issuing fire from his head, is the priest unfit to celebrate mass and who did not "carefully prepare the Holy Eucharist". Also severely punished are the teacher who did not observe what he taught, and the reader of the Scriptures who paid no heed to what he read. The patriarchs, metropolitans, bishops and monks who did not keep their vows are punished inside a large dark tower. Hanging from her hands and feet, remorselessly consumed by flames, is the priest's wife who turned to prostitution. The hierodeaconess who dishonoured her husband is being tortured, while being burnt up by the fire are the wicked nuns who did not "guard their virginity", or who traduced and accused. In the boiling, seething waves of the River of Fire are embezzlers, profiteers, drunkards, the unjust, princes and richmen who gave no charity, cruel kings, pederasts and homosexual priests. In the most horrible place, the "outermost darkness" are punished the Jews and other unbelievers, murderers, women who have had abortions and all who practise soothsaying. In dark pools of pitch and brimstone are tortured those who committed incest, those who lived a profligate life, atheists, those who died unconfessed, vain women and procurers.

On seeing the sinners the Virgin is moved and commands all the hosts of Angels to pray for their redemption. Despite Christ's initial refusal to give forgiveness, thanks to the common deesis addressed to the Lord of All, a respite is secured in the tortures of the sinners for fifty days; from the Resurrection until All Saints Day. Next, on Christ's order, the Virgin visits Paradise, where the "blessed" are praised.

The next ends by re-enumerating the sinners who are punished eternally: adulterers, whores, homosexual priests, whoseover does not keep the Sabbath and the saints' feasts, and those who do not respect their parents. Finally, the Angels transport the Virgin to the domain of the apostles, to whom they also relate all they have seen. The apostles wrote down these terrible things in order to admonish the world. Thus not only those who acquired and studied the tract are considered favoured but also all those who read it to their neighbours²¹.

The text, generally simplistic, somewhat careless and badly organized, seeks through constant repetition of specific categories of miscreants who are punished to counsel the social body as a whole and to exhort it to avoid specific acts.

Some of the words used echo the local idiom, influenced by the now-days defunct Italian vocabulary.

Written in the middle of the page, in Latin characters, is the date when the text was penned (25th November, 1816) and the signature of the

scribe: "Manolis Malano Girighoto scrivere". Elsewhere, again in Italian, it is noted that the text was written for the purpose of instruction ("sribiama di imparare") and it is stressed that in order to write well one must study, which fact argues for the text's wide diffusion not only as a moralistic but as a didactic medium.

An issue which merits further research concerns the compilation of the text; that is whether it is simply the copy of an original or whether it is the setting down of a text known from oral tradition.

Worthy of note is the author's insistence that those who lead a dissolute life, lay and clergy, are punished. This fact, combined with the date when the text was written, strongly suggests that he had in mind specific incidents in Kytherian life which he wanted to reprove.

In the Kytherian Chronicles of the priest Gregorios Logothetis²², who lived on the island in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, are mentioned inter alia political events occurring between 1780 and 1817, and information on the private life, social precepts and cultural models in general of the period. Mentioned in passim are the exemplary punishment of a priest who brought shame to the cloth, as well as two cases of the public derision of adultresses, incidents evidently known to the compiler of the text of the *Apocalypse*. Bearing in mind the knowledge of ecclesiastical terminology, and combining this with the above intelligence and the time of writing, then the most likely candidate as author of the tract is Manolis Malanos, priest and notary, mentioned on the catalogue of the notarial archive of Kythera between the years 1782 and 1817²³, a period of intense social and economic upheavals.

In its different versions, the text of the *Apocalypse of the Virgin* continues the mythical journey to the Underworld, combining elements of past and present, preserved the one close to the other and so accepted by different people. Though new paradigms of belief may well have been formulated and "catharsis acquired a new content" within the framework of Christian tradition, the earlier models never disappeared completely and were maintained consciously or uncounsciously.

Fear of the after life and the fact that sinners do not go unpunished constitute a linking element between the mythical stories and the texts of the *Apocalypse*, as well as an optimistic view of salvation, characteristic of Greek thought. Moreover, it is impossible that "mediation", which according to Levi-Strauss constitutes a component of universal order, would not intrude as a role-element in the concept of the other life, since in all myths this is actually an extension of the life we live. And just as in all myths, so in the text of the *Apocalypse of the Virgin*, there exist in addition to the static elements, mutable ones, those based on whatever historical development creates and determined by the particular mechanisms which run through the structure of the society of a given period.

Last, it should be noted that the mythical theme of the journey to the Underworld - whether "in corporem" or in dream - constitutes a diachronic element, which evolves and adapts to existing historical and social circumstances, recording fundamental stories for the purpose of maintaining order.

1 The relevant bibliography is extensive. We cite indicatively *Ελληνική Μυθολογία*, EKDOTIKE ATHENON (ed.), Athens, 1986, vol. 2, 217-223; K. KERENYI *Die*

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- Mythologie der Griechen*, Zürich, 1964; H.J. ROSE, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology*, London 6, 1958, 78-101.
- 2 The god has many names and epithets, of which we note *Aidoneus*. At the nekromanteion on the river Acheron in Epiros, where it was also believed that the gateway to Hades was located, Saint Donatos is nowadays worshipped. According to local tradition, he slew the spirit which haunted the river and freed the inhabitants of their obligation to provide a virgin every year for it to violate and devour. Since that day the waters of the river, which were previously bitter, have been sweet, and the Acheron has been used to supply water to the region's villages.
 - 3 As in the *Odyssey*, 11, 507ff.
 - 4 Numerous scholars have studied this subject, see Στέλιος ΛΑΜΠΙΑΚΗΣ, *Οι Καταβάσεις στον Κάτω Κόσμο στη Βυζαντινή και στη Μεταβυζαντινή Λογοτεχνία*, Athens, 1982 (with extensive bibliography).
 - 5 Such as Dionysos, for example, who sought out his mother, Semele, and brought her back to the Upper World where, under the name of Thyone, he took her with him as a god, to heaven.
 - 6 Pausanias (II, 37, 3-7) mentions that he had seen the Alkyonian Lake, from where, the Argeians claimed, Dionysos had gone down into Hades to bring back Semele. This descent had been pointed out to him by Polymnos (or Prosymnos in a proposed correction), though not without recompense - which was not a good thing but was to Dionysos liking. Considerable information on Dionysos' descent into Hades is given by Clement of Alexandria, with the characteristic "harshness of the early Christians", see also Roberto CALASSO, *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, 1988, 240ff. (in the greek edition). The god was worshipped in the region with secret rites. The lake, which still exists today, has dense vegetation on its shores and a calm surface, giving the impression of a swamp of unfathomable depth.
 - 7 Dionysos was not the only god who found it necessary to ask a man the way to Hades. Demeter to, in her wanderings in quest of her daughter (Kore) Persephone, after her rape by Pluton, asked the King of Eleusis, Keleos, where she would find her daughter again. Keleos suggested Hades: see CALASSO, *op. cit.*
On his descent to the kingdom of the Underworld to take back his mother Semele, Dionysos was obliged to leave something he was particularly fond of a branch of myrtle. Thus the myrtle, the sacred plant of Aphrodite and of Dionysos, became associated not only with love but also with mourning (see CALASSO, *op. cit.*). Newlyweds used to put wreaths of myrtle on earth and, even today, it is customary to place this plant on graves in the cemeteries, or to decorate churches and their courtyards with it on feast days in memory of some saint.
 - 8 In this period men sought by all possible means to rid themselves of their fear of the wrath of the gods and the punishment of death. New moral and religious values appeared at this time.
 - 9 Initially Hades welcomed Theseus and his companion courteously. Later on, however, he repaid them the hubris; he bound them with invisible chains to golden thrones. These bonds - for the majority bonds of oblivion - kept them forever in the realm of the dead, making them forget themselves. That is where Odysseus saw them. When Herakles descended into Hades he met Theseus and Peirithos and wanted to release them. However, he only had the strength to free Theseus from the throne, and indeed it is said that pieces of the hero's body remained attached to it during his violent removal. The fact that Athenian boys had "small thighs lacking in flesh" is attributed to this event: see *Ελληνική Μυθολογία*, vol. 3, 52-57 and CALASSO, *op. cit.*, 69ff.
 - 10 As for instance the perception of the abduction of females.
 - 11 See also *Ελληνική Μυθολογία*, *op. cit.*
 - 12 *Odyssey*, 12, 13, 1ff.

- 13 In the fifth century BC the Thasian artist Polygnotos had painted the Underworld, as described in the *Odyssey*, in the interior of the Lesche of the Knidians at Delphi. Anonymous sinners (e.g. the impious, traducers, spurners of the mysteries) and eponymous ones (e.g. Theseus, Peirithos, Sisyphos etc.) were depicted together in a common area.
- 14 They are also mentioned by Plato in *The Republic*, 2, 363-364, see also Ν. ΠΑΠΑΧΑΤΖΗΣ, *Η Θρησκεία στην αρχαία Ελλάδα*, Athens, 1987, 92ff.
- 15 He mentions them in *The Republic* (614-621), where the question of revival is raised for the first time; that is someone believed dead returned to life and proceeds to describe the peregrinations of his soul as if in a dream.
- 16 Mainly through the works of Lucian.
- 17 See ΛΑΜΠΙΑΚΗΣ, *op. cit.*, 46ff.
- 18 According to scholars the original idea of the Virgin's descent as a mediator for sinners should be dated to the fifth century AD: see ΛΑΜΠΙΑΚΗΣ, *op. cit.* Certainly the first narrations, later known in different versions, many of which are still unpublished, were in circulation in the sixth century. Several printed versions also appeared. One is published by Ν. ΠΟΛΙΤΗΣ in his *Μελέτη επί του βίου των Νεωτέρων Ελλήνων*, 1874, vol. II, 375-390, while a cretan version, derived from a codex in the Marciani Library in Venice, was published by R.M. DAWKINS: see Κρητικά Χρονικά, 2, (1948), 487-500, and *ibid.* "A Cretan Apocalypse of the Virgin", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 30, (1930), 300-304. See also Μ.Σ. ΚΟΡΔΩΣΗΣ, "Ελληνικά παλαιότυπα σε βιβλιοθήκες της πόλεως των Ιωαννίνων. II. Παλαιότυπα Ζωσμαιάς βιβλιοθήκης και άλλων βιβλιοθηκών της πόλεως", *Δωδώνη* 5, (1976), p. 187, no 82.
- 19 Characteristic is the phrase of a woman, quoted by Ν. Politis who wanted to emphasize the power of this tract among ordinary folk at the beginning of the century: "I heard them reading the Virgin's pamphlet and my heart split into four".
- 20 The text is from the personal archive of the greek lawyer Mr Sp. STRATIGOS, who discovered it in his family library in the village of Mylopotamos, where his grandfather was a priest and schoolmaster.
- 21 Described in the second part of the pamphlet is the vision of Saint Anthony, a version of the "narrative of Saint Anthony", which also refers to the place of the sinners in Hell.
- 22 See Σπ. ΣΤΑΘΗ, "Κυθηραϊκή Επιθεώρησης", *Εστία*, 1923, 337-364.
- 23 See also Χρ. ΜΑΛΤΕΞΟΥ, "Το νοταριακό αρχείο Κυθήρων", *Δελτίον της Ιονίου Ακαδημίας*, 1, 1976, 15-84.

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