

SHEDDING LIGHT ON SOME ORPHIC GODS

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Beyond the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, so well known today, is a much more complex theology of emanated deities and a detailed cosmology, which Orphism reinterpreted for the Greek world.

“Everything comes to be out of One and is resolved into One.” (Musaeus, student of Orpheus¹)

The subject of the Orphic Mysteries has consumed the majority of my research in recent years, and I have already written several articles on the subject. For this particular article I have decided against writing a general overview of the Orphic beliefs and practices and instead intend to focus on two intriguing deities who are mentioned in the Orphic myths, namely Phanes and Zagreus. These two figures are unique in that they are not typically mentioned in popular Greek mythology.² I also chose these two deities because they both belong to the line of succession that ends with Dionysos. Some scholars interpret them as previous generations in Dionysos’s family tree, while others, more familiar with metaphysical thinking, view them all as different incarnations of the same deity.

In this particular article I intend to first give readers a basic outline of the section of the Orphic theogony that involves Phanes. From there, his attributes and functions will be discussed, using numerous ancient authors as source material. We shall then move our attention to Zagreus in much the same manner: first there will be a brief retelling of the appropriate section of the myth. Following this, commentary from ancient as well as modern sources will be provided. In the final section of the article I will synthesize the information given thus far, and offer an interpretation that brings in ideas of spirituality, philosophy, and universality.



Bas-relief of Phanes (2nd Century CE),
Modena Museum, Italy.

Phanes

The Myth of Phanes:³ In the beginning, all was dark, and nothing existed but two winged serpents.⁴ They mated and produced a brilliant egg.⁵ One serpent wrapped himself around the egg and squeezed it until it broke open. Emerging from within was the winged hermaphroditic deity Phanes. Light radiated from his body that was so bright no one could see him. He had four eyes, horns, and the heads of a bull, ram, a lion, and a serpent. From the top half of the shell he created the heavens and from the bottom portion he created the earth. He mated with himself and gave birth to the goddess Nyx. He also mated with Nyx and she gave birth to Gaia and Ouranos. Phanes then began to create the physical world by assigning a place for the sun, moon, and stars.

The basic myth is believed to date from at least the end of the archaic period. Aristophanes makes reference to it in his comedy *The Birds*,⁶ first performed in 414 BCE. Although in the play the myth is altered slightly, the figure of Phanes is still clearly identifiable by his glittering golden wings and the fact that he is born from an egg.⁷

The name *Phanes* comes from the Greek *phainein* “to bring light” and *phainesthai* “to

shine.” In ancient times, some Orphics thought his name should be translated in the active voice as “the bringer of light,” while others believed it should be taken in the middle voice as “the Glittering One.”⁸ The *Rhapsodies* describes him thus: “And all the others marveled when they saw the unlooked-for light in the *aither*; so richly gleamed the body of immortal Phanes.”⁹

Phanes can be described physically as Light and metaphysically as Intellect.¹⁰ Generally, the Platonists view Phanes as representing the Sun of the Intelligible world.¹¹ Proclus says Phanes is “the first intelligible intellect,” and “unfold[s] himself into the light.”¹² Hermeas calls him the “boundary of the intelligible,” who “illuminates the intellectual Gods with intelligible light.”¹³ Phanes brings light into the darkness and order out of chaos.¹⁴ His birth is the first step taken by the Divine who is unformed and without qualities.

Phanes as a hermaphroditic being represents his role as the definitive creator god.¹⁵ He has within him “the seed of all the gods.”¹⁶ His wings and numerous heads can be simply explained as representing an extremely powerful and mind-boggling deity. It is likely that the imagery is influenced, even borrowed, from mythological figures from other ancient Mediterranean cultures.¹⁷

Phanes has many heads and eyes, but does not have a body. This symbolizes that the lower physical world has not yet been made manifest.¹⁸ Hermeas suggests that his four eyes represent that he unites the original monad with the issuing triad.¹⁹ Pythagoras believed the monad was the source of all other numbers. Three represented completeness because it had a beginning, middle, and end. The number four symbolized perfection, and its corresponding shape was the square.²⁰ Regardless of the particular interpretation, Phanes certainly is the anthropomorphic representation of the solution to the One-Many problem that so troubled the early Orphics and pre-Socratic philosophers.

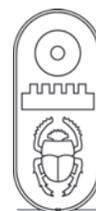
Zagreus

The Myth of Zagreus:²¹ Zeus had decided to pass his kingdom onto his son, Zagreus, even though he was just a young child. This inspired jealousy in some of the other gods, and the Titans plotted revenge against the boy. They disguised themselves by whitening their faces and brought several gifts to Zagreus: a mirror, apples, a ball, knucklebones, a pinecone, a bull-roarer, wool, puppets, and a narthex.²² They used these gifts to lure Zagreus far away from the other gods, and once out of sight, they attacked him. First they dismembered him, cutting him up into seven pieces. The pieces were boiled, then roasted.²³ Then they feasted. However, Athena came upon them and was able to save one piece, the heart, which was still beating. She quickly brought it to Zeus, who was furious at the Titans. In his anger, Zeus hurled his thunderbolts at the Titans, which immediately destroyed them. Zeus then took the heart of Zagreus and used it to restore him to life. From the soot left from the Titans, Zeus fashioned human beings, animals, and birds.

The name *Zagreus*, often translated as “great hunter,” seems to be a contraction of *za-* “very” and *-agreus* “hunter.” *Zagre*, an Ioian word, means “a pit for capturing animals.”²⁴ Perhaps the name refers to some myth of this god that has unfortunately been lost to us. It is rather ironic that here Zagreus seems to be the hunted and not the hunter!

As for his physical appearance, Zagreus has horns.²⁵ This serves to further connect Zagreus with Phanes, who you will recall is also said to have horns.²⁶

The Titans cut Zagreus up into seven pieces. Each of the seven pieces represent the seven heavenly bodies, and the heart, which we think of as the seat of the soul of the individual, represents the intellect of the World-Soul.²⁷ This World-Soul, of course, cannot be divided. Zagreus, who may be thought of as another incarnation of the earlier Phanes, is also an





Titanic Underworld, Victoria Franck-Wetsch, S.R.C.

anthropomorphic representation of the One-Many problem. He begins as one being who is then separated into many pieces, boiled, roasted, and ingested. However, from the heart, the one piece that is saved, Zeus is able to restore the body of Zagreus, thus completing the cycle from one to many back to one again. Because of this teaching, Harrison writes that Zagreus is “especially an Orphic name. Zagreus is the god of the mysteries, and his full content can only be understood in relation to Orphic rites.”²⁸

Discussion

Within the egg, Phanes represents the union (perfection) of opposites.²⁹ When the egg splits, the upper portion becomes the heavens, and the lower the earth. Some ancient writers commented that the heavenly portion was made from gold, while the earthly portion was made from silver.³⁰ These pairs of opposites associated with Phanes are continued; he himself is light, while his consort/daughter is Nyx (Night). Furthermore, together they produce two children, Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Heaven). They represent phenomenon and noumenon respectively.³¹

The figure of Zagreus does not so much represent a unification of opposites as Phanes does, but his myth results in the synthesis of opposites. The mirror in the myth represents a false counterpart to our reality; quite literally a mirror image is the opposite of what is reflected in the mirror. Zagreus is distracted by his image,³² which here symbolizes the physical world as a reflection of the spiritual realm. Olympiodorus explained that the essence of Zagreus was assumed into all of creation by virtue of looking into the mirror and pursuing his image.³³ As Mead wrote, the myth “is a dramatic history of the wanderings of the ‘Pilgrim-Soul’.”³⁴ He must pass through “the trial of separation and fragmentation through the process of differentiation.”³⁵ This is another common theme in world mythology, and is similar to many of the later Alchemical texts. It is only through being seemingly destroyed that we come full circle to be whole. Thus we have the cycle of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in an evolving form in the Zagreus myth.

Phanes is the source of light and intelligence for the cosmos, and Zagreus provides the soul by which to spiritualize all of creation.³⁶ Phanes begins the cycle of creation, and Zagreus puts it into eternal motion. The myth emphasizes that One becomes many and becomes One again by virtue of the divine link between the Universe, the Divine, and human beings through this eternal cycle.

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During Phanes' reign the world is created in its spiritual state. Zeus gains power a few generations later and makes the world manifest in its physical form. Zagreus, who is *handed* the throne by Zeus, is meant to achieve the synthesis of these two apparent states during his reign. However, he is unable to fulfill his duties and thus the responsibilities fall to his successors, which according to the myth, is the race of human beings.

“The souls of men, seeing their images in the mirror of Dionysus as it were, have entered into that realm in a leap downward from the Supreme: yet even they are not cut off from their origin, from the divine Intellect; it is not that they have come bringing the Intellectual Principle down in their fall; it is that though they have descended even to earth, yet their higher part holds for ever above the heavens” (Plotinus).³⁷

Endnotes

¹ As quoted in [Diogenes Laertius, *proem.* 3](#)

² In fact, one may even use the presence of the name “Phanes” or “Zagreus” as one indicator for classifying a text, etc., as “Orphic.”

³ All details taken from the *Rhapsodies* unless otherwise noted.

⁴ *Argonautica* 12 ff.

⁵ The “Cosmic Egg” is a common theme in comparative mythology. A few examples are the Chinese yin and yang emerging from an egg with the help of a creator god, and the Egyptian myth in which the bird-god Benu lays an egg on a mound, and from the egg the sun god is born. The Judeo-Christian creation myth in *Genesis* is very similar; first there is light and the heavens are separated from the earth. However, an actual egg is not present. Furthermore, the “Big Bang” theory may also be thought of as a creation myth with an egg-like “object” containing the stuff of all creation.

⁶ 690 ff. (= *Orphicorum Fragmenta*, fr. 1)

⁷ There were, of course, many different versions of this myth in ancient times, just as was commonplace for any myth popular among people who for the most part passed stories on by oral tradition.

⁸ Walter Wili, “The Orphic Mysteries and the Greek Spirit,” *The Mysteries: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 71.

⁹ As quoted in W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 95.

¹⁰ Isaac Preston Cory, *Metaphysical Inquiry into the Method, Objects, and Result of Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (London: William Pickering, 1833), 30.

¹¹ William Smith, William Wayte, and G.E. Marindin, eds., *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London: John Murray, 1891), 301.

¹² Thomas Taylor, trans., *The Commentaries of Proclus on the Timaeus of Plato, in Five Books; Containing a Treasury of Pythagoric and Platonic Physiology, Vol. 1* (London: by the author, 1820), 361.

¹³ As quoted in Thomas Taylor, *The Mystical Hymns of Orpheus* (London: Bertram Dobell, 1896), 14-15.

¹⁴ Michael Jordan, *Encyclopedia of Gods* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 204.

¹⁵ This hermaphroditic quality is later echoed in popular Greek mythology in epithets of Dionysos such as Androgynos (“androgynous”), Arsenothelys (“man-womanly”), Enorches (“betesticled”), Gynnis (“womanly”), and Pseudanor (“false man”).

¹⁶ Damascius, as quoted in Andrew Lang, *Myth, Ritual, and Religion* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), 299.

¹⁷ Two interesting articles on this topic are: M.L. West, “Graeco-Oriental Orphism in the 3rd cent. BC,” *Assimilation et résistance à la culture Gréco-romaine dans le monde ancien: Travaux du VIth*

Congrès International d'Etudes Classiques (Paris, 1976), 221-226; and M.J. Edwards, “Gnostic Eros and Orphic Themes,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 88 (1991): 25-40.

¹⁸ Manly P. Hall, *Lectures on Ancient Philosophy and Introduction to the Study and Application of Rational Procedure* (Los Angeles: Hall, 1929), 203.

¹⁹ As cited in George Stanley Faber, *The Origin of Pagan Idolatry Ascertained from Historical Testimony and Circumstantial Evidence*. Vol. 1 (London: F. and C. Rivingtons, 1816), 262.

²⁰ David Livingstone, *The Dying God: The Hidden History of Western Civilization*. (Lincoln: iUniverse, 2002), 135.

²¹ All details taken from the *Rhapsodies* unless otherwise noted.

²² Proclus on Hesiod's *Works and Days*, 52.

²³ This is the opposite of how meat was cooked during a religious sacrifice in ancient Greece. The myth intends to highlight the perversion of the Titans' actions.

²⁴ Carl Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 82.

²⁵ Nonnus. *Dionysiaca* 6.155 ff: Dionysos's traditional “totem” animal in popular Greek mythology is the bull or goat. Nonnus said that Zagreus changed himself into many forms in order to escape the Titans, including a bull. See James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 451.

²⁶ Furthermore, Persephone, who is the mother of Zagreus in the *Rhapsodies*, also has horns, two faces, and four eyes.

²⁷ Plotinus, as summarized in Luc Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 77.

²⁸ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 481.

²⁹ Christopher Bamford et al., *Homage to Pythagoras: Rediscovering Sacred Science* (New York: Steiner Books, 1994), 22.

³⁰ Hall, *Lectures on Ancient Philosophy*, 203.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

³² Narcissus is similarly distracted by his reflection in the pond, refusing to leave the site, and is changed into the flower.

³³ Olympiodorus's commentary on the *Phaedo* of Plato, as quoted in Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (St. Paul: Llewellyn 1993), 428.

³⁴ G.R.S. Mead, *The Orphic Pantheon* (Edmonds: The Alexandrian Press, 1984), 22.

³⁵ Marcel Detienne, *The Writing of Orpheus: Greek Myth in Cultural Context* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 157.

³⁶ Edwin O. James, *Creation and Cosmology: A Historical and Comparative Inquiry* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 75. tt

³⁷ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 4:3, 12.

