On the Topography of the Greek Underworld and the ‘Orphic’ Gold Tablets

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The descent into the underworld is said to be a parallel to the birth of a god: both actions result in the beginning of a transcendent existence.² It is through death that mortals are able to gain immortal status, albeit in a very different form than their Olympian counterparts. Ancient Greek conceptions of death are still murky, but with the discovery of artifacts such as the so-called ‘Orphic’ gold tablets, Classical scholars are getting closer to constructing a complete picture of the afterlife of Hellenes. It is interesting, however, that despite the amount of literature written on the subject of mystery cults and their relationship to death (that is, their promise of a more comfortable afterlife assuming initiation into their rites), there is a surprising lack of comment on what happens after the fateful moment. While it is true that the gold tablets mentioned above provide what appear to be directions for navigating the underworld, such instructions can be of little use to Classical underworld scholars when the topography of Hades is unknown to them. I have yet to find a comprehensive body of work that details all the aspects of the Greek underworld in such a structured way as to create what amounts to a roadmap. In order to traverse the complex geography of the underworld, I propose to provide scholars with a guide based on the writings of Archaic Greek authors. I explore the eschatological symbolism of many of the most important chthonian aspects of Greek religion, creating a web of interconnectedness based on ancient sources that shows the Greeks had a definitive answer to what lay beyond. In addition, I will explore the usefulness of the Orphic gold tablets in contributing to our understanding of both real and imagined Greek religious practices.

Assuming you have received proper burial rites, the journey after one’s death begins quite immediately.³ According to Homer, Hermes plays the role of ψυχοπομπός (ψuchopompós) who was entrusted with the task of escorting newly deceased souls to their new home in the underworld. The best attestation of this process is described in Od.xxiv.1, when Hermes comes to the house of Odysseus to escort the slaughtered suitors to Hades:

Meanwhile Cylenian Hermes called forth the spirits of the wooers. He held in his hands his wand, a fair wand of gold, wherewith he lulls to sleep the eyes of whom he will, while others

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³ Homer, Odyssey xi.70-80. The dead Elpenor desires to receive his full funeral rites, lest the wrath of the gods be brought down upon those who do not concede to their will.
again he wakens even out of slumber; with this he roused and led the spirits, and they followed gibbering... and Hermes, the Helper, led them down the dank ways. Past the streams of Oceanus [sic] they went, past the rock Leucas, past the gates of the sun and the land of dreams, and quickly came to the mead of asphodel, where the spirits dwell, phantoms of men who have done with toils.⁴

From this passage we can conclude that the newly dead are not left to wander the earth as a shade until they find the appropriate πλοντώνια ‘entrance to the underworld,’ but have what amounts to a shepherd.⁵ Hermes leads them to the river Akheron, which lies at the entrance to the realm of Hades, located beyond the great river Okeanos.⁶ When Odysseus meets the sorceress Circe on her island during his journey home, she provides us with an excellent geographical representation of what to be on the look for when we reach the next stage of our journey. She claims that at the entrance to the land of the dead, “the stream of Akheron is joined by the waters of Pyrphlegethon and of a branch of Styx, Kokytos, and there is a rock where the two loud-roaring rivers meet.”⁷ Melanippides gives us an etymology of the river’s name, stating that it is the cause of all pain (akhe) for mortals;⁸ logically this must be so, as to see this river would be painful to one still holding on to hope of returning to life.

Along the bank of the Akheron is docked the boat of the ferryman Kharon, who is often represented as being quite impatient to move the dead along.⁹ Depicted as a wizened old man¹⁰ this retched daimon is the reason behind the Greek burial tradition of placing coins in the mouths of the deceased. Herakles, speaking in Aristophenes’ Frogs,¹¹ claims that the fare is two obols, although there are other traditions in which it is different¹² or altogether not stated. This payment requirement sheds light on the pleadings of Elpenor to be buried properly, because if he does not come with payment he will be forced to wander the banks of the Akheron and not be granted admittance into Hades. The final obstacle to traverse before you enter the realm of your eternity is the dreaded guard dog of the underworld authority, Cerberus. Though Hesiod describes him as “powerful, and without pity” at the dog’s inception,¹³ he later describes him as fawning on all who enter through his gates, wagging his tail and perking his ears.¹⁴ So long as your shade was cooperative, there would be nothing to fear from the dog; as soon as you attempted escape, however, one of his fifty heads would be ready to strike you down and devour your treacherous soul.¹⁵

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⁴ Ibid., xxiv.1
⁵ Albinus, 69.
⁶ Homer Od.xx.513.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Stobaeus, Anthology, 759.
⁹ Euripides, Alcestis, 252.
¹⁰ Pausanias, 10.28.1 on the painting of the underworld by Polygnotos.
¹¹ Aristophanes, Frogs, 180 ff.
¹² A drachma according to Callimachus, Hecale 31.
¹³ His birth to Echidna in Hesiod, Theogony, 310.
¹⁴ Hes. Th. 769.
¹⁵ Hes. Th. 769.
The next stage in the underworld journey is unclear in terms of sequence. There are many ancient authors who attest that judgment by the Judges of the Dead occurred before you were granted full entry into Hades. According to Diodorus Siculus, the Cretan king brothers Minos and Rhadamanthys were appointed as two such judges because of their preoccupation with justice and their accordance with the laws. These two judges determine where in Hades you will spend your eternal life. Classical philosophers and mystics divided the realm of the dead into three very distinct regions. These physical distinctions within the wider geography of the Greek underworld will be examined further, but first there is another reference to the rivers, which characterize underworld topography.

The river Lethe is designed to be the aquatic manifestation of a double-edged sword. It is “here he must drink water called the water of Lethe (Forgetfulness), that he may forget all that he has been thinking of hitherto,” which can be both a blessing and a curse when looked at from the standpoint of immortality. On the one hand, forgetting your living life would be terrifying, as the thought of losing all memories and even your sense of identity feeds on a most basic human fear. However, when you have a life full of greyness to look forward to, the forgetfulness brought about by the river Lethe would ease the suffering brought about by remembering and reminiscing about the land of the living. If the only options are being constantly tormented by your past life, or taking a quick drink to start your eternity with a fresh slate, the choice seems obvious. Nonetheless, it is difficult to decide to annihilate the memory of your entire existence with a simple draught.

I now return to the three divisions of the Greek underworld, which were attested as early as the writings of Hesiod. The sentence decreed by the Judges of the Dead therefore takes one of three forms: eternal punishment for an immoral life, eternal bliss for a heroic life, and a third option that cannot be as easily characterized. This third, and largest, division of the underworld was known as the Fields of Asphodel, as mentioned in the above passage from Od.xxiv. This area was represented as a general holding ground for the vast majority of the souls that entered into Hades. Here the ghosts were as plentiful as the asphodel flowers that grew there, “presumably strange, pallid, ghostly flowers” different from the ones in the realm of the living. When Odysseus makes his journey to the Halls of Hades to consult the Theban prophet Teiresias, there is a terrible groan that comes from the swarming shades. Teiresias describes Asphodel as a place forsaken of sunlight and lacking in joy where the souls of the deceased can neither think nor feel, only flit about in worthless semi-existence. This was the eternal home of the common people, those who had done neither great nor terrible deeds and who, according to Homer, had lived their life in toil. The lives of the men who reside therein were not noteworthy, especially when compared to the stories of those who have been sentenced to Tartarus. Hesiod describes it as a great pit beneath Hades, as far down below as Olympus is above, where the

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16 Diodorus, Library, V.79.2.
18 Paus.9.39.3.
21 Hom.Od.xi.93-94.
22 Hom.Od.xxiv.
edge of the world is held up by the Titan Atlas.\textsuperscript{23} It is to Tartarus that the Titans were banished following their unsuccessful campaign against the Olympians in the Titanomachy, and it is thence that the souls of scoundrels and those that offend the gods are sentenced to suffer. Men like Sisyphus, Tantalus, and Tityos—those who are deceitful, murderous, lustful, and take no qualms in betraying the gods—are condemned to Tartarus where they must endure perpetual punishment.\textsuperscript{24} It is no wonder that mystery cults such as those at Eleusis came about with the promise of a more comfortable afterlife, since so far the only two prospects of life after death are either torture or perpetual boredom in a field of dreary grey flowers.

There was, however, the promise of respite from these deplorable conditions if you are judged honourable enough. When Odysseus met the shade of Achilles in Book 24, he described the Trojan War hero as \textit{μάκαρ} (‘blessed’) in the same way as Hesiod describes his Silver Race and Age of Heroes in \textit{Works and Days}.\textsuperscript{25} Men of this virtuous character were thought to receive the pleasures of living in what Hesiod and many others referred to as the Islands of the Blessed,\textsuperscript{26} a land at the end of the earth past the swirling river of Okeanos. Ruled over by, according to varying traditions, either Kronos or Rhadamanthys, this was the home of a purely pleasurable existence free from inclement weather or laborious toils.\textsuperscript{27} Although well attested to be the eternal resting place of the souls of heroes, there is little evidence that average Greeks actually believed they could live a life virtuous enough to be granted such a blissful afterlife. Although the poet Pindar wrote eloquently on the subject of the underworld,\textsuperscript{28} it would be difficult to say whether the existence of such islands were a true belief of his, or used purely for dramatic iteration.

The Greek underworld division of the Islands of the Blessed (also known as \textit{Elusion}, ‘Elysium’, or ‘Elysian Fields’) was in many ways a positive reflection of Tartarus, but at the same time shared a deep association with Hades as a whole. In the traditions such as Hesiod’s where the region is not an integral part of the underworld geography, Elysium and Hades share an association through their marginal locations, both lying beyond the realm of the living at the edge of the earth.\textsuperscript{29} Further, they share the relationship of the Cretan brother kings Minos and Rhadamanthys, the latter it is said to be both a judge of souls and the king of the blest.\textsuperscript{30}

While we have thus far traversed the physical topography of the Greek underworld, there are still important aspects on which we must touch, specifically the vast array of deities who either reside in or are associated with the darkness of Erebus.\textsuperscript{31} We begin with the inception of such primordial chthonic deities as described in Hesiod’s cosmology:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Hes.Th.715.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Albinus, 78.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Hesiod, \textit{Works and Days},171-173; Albinus, 75.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Hes.\textit{WD}.156.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Hom.Od.iv.56.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Pindar, \textit{Olympian}, 2.57; Pindar, \textit{Fragment} 133.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Albinus, 89.
\item \textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid}.
\item \textsuperscript{31} An alternate name for Hades. See, Hes.Th.669.
\end{itemize}
In truth at first Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever-sure foundation of all the deathless ones who hold the peaks of snowy Olympus, and dim Tartarus in the depth of the wide-pathed Earth, and Eros, fairest among the deathless gods, who unnerves the limbs and overcomes the mind and wise counsels of all gods and all men within them. From Chaos came forth Erebus and black Night; but of Night were born Aether and Day, whom she conceived and bore from union in love with Erebus. And Earth first bore starry Heaven, equal to herself, to cover her on every side, and to be an ever-sure abiding-place for the blessed gods.32

The inclusion of the lesser known, and admittedly less eschatologically significant, deities is typical of Hesiodic poetry, wherein an extensive list of divine beings is presented simply for the purpose of creating a complex hierarchy. In order to fully understand the role of the Greek underworld from a mortal perspective, there are other deities to whom we should turn our focus, primarily “strong Hades and... awful Persephone.”33 In his article, “The Chthonic Gods of Greek Religion”, Arthur Fairbanks refers to these chthonic deities as “gods of the realm beneath the earth, which is the realm of souls. They are not gods of the souls... They are rulers of souls.”34 It is therefore important to view them not as deities to be worshipped in and of themselves, but rather those invoked when a mortal needs to formulate a connection with the dead souls over which they hold dominion.35 In fact, the very worship of the King and Queen of the underworld was markedly different from that of their Olympian counterparts; this is due in part to the fact that local variation transcended a universal mythology. That is, there was no singular way to worship a deity, and small towns could have different perceptions and methods of worship for a god than do large poleis.36

While it can be noted that instances of the direct worship of Hades were few and far between, the cult that sprang up around his wife and mother-in-law is much better attested.37 Interestingly, the cult monuments dedicated to Persephone fall into two distinct categories, each having a different association and therefore pertaining to different spheres of the goddess’ influence. She is worshipped both as the Bride of Hades, and as the Daughter of Demeter,38 appealing to the bipolarity inherent in many Greek deities. When she is Hades’ wife, she is worshipped in order to allow passage into Elysium, serving as a judge of souls much like Minos and Rhadamanthys. When she is worshipped alongside her mother, she takes on varying aspects of her persona including agricultural goddess and administrator of the mysteries.39 The initiatory rites that the individual was engaged in are of less importance to the understanding of Eleusinian Mysteries than are what the act of the initiation embodied.

32 Hes. Th.115-130.
33 Hes. Th.767.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 250.
37 Ibid., 252.
38 Ibid., 247.
39 ‘Chthonic’ in the cultus usage of the term. See, Fairbanks, 247.
It is here that we turn full circle and return to the concept of knowledge about what encapsulated the Greek afterlife. It is clear from the abundant literature heretofore cited that the underworld was a rather dreary place and if something could be done during your lifetime to improve your eternal living conditions, one should take full advantage. In a fragmentary piece of writing, Pindar glorifies the initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries by stating, “Blessed is he who hath seen these things before he goeth beneath the hollow earth; for he understandeth the end of mortal life, and the beginning of a new life given of god.” An explicit statement that the purpose of the mysteries was to prepare the initiates for a more blessed afterlife on the basis of their connection with the goddesses. Persephone, in her role as judge of the deceased souls but also of cultic leader, attempts to bridge the gap between the living and the dead to impart wisdom on a precious few so as to allow them a more easy transition into eternal monotony by granting them the ability to accept their fate.

It is at this point that I relate the discussion of the worship of the underworld deities by upper-world mortals to the general theme of Greek underworld topography. Using the evidence of the purpose of the Eleusinian mysteries for helping initiates to secure a better afterlife, we can conclude that there is at least some level of ‘instruction’ given to those willing to better their lot in the afterlife. Unfortunately for these initiates, a more blessed afterlife is worth nothing if your knowledge on how to traverse the realm of Hades is limited. In the absence of true literature on the subject of death (since no one but mythical figures such as Herakles and Orpheus have ever returned from the land of the dead), the newly deceased made use of inscribed gold tablets that “instruct him on how to behave when he finds himself on the road to the lower world.” While the literary evidence from sources like Hesiod, Pindar, and Homer provide Greeks with an understanding of the geography of Hades and the general process of death-transportation-judgment-eternity model, the exact nuances are absent, leaving the deceased lost despite the guidance of the psuchopompus Hermes. It is akin to when someone unaccustomed to elite events is invited to a formal dinner party; they may receive a description of the house and how to get there, but their behaviour at dinner is by no means governed by this information. Such a guest would need instructions on which fork to use for which course and when to dip your fingers in the lemon water, just as a fresh soul would need instructions on how to conduct himself within the ‘House of Hades’.

There are further detailed interpretations of the Orphic gold tablets and their relationship to Bacchic ritual and reincarnation, however we are concerned with the comprehensive accounts of their use as instruction manuals for cultic initiates such as those detailed in Graf & Johnston. For instance, the Hipponion and Petelia tablets explained how to be received into the royal court of Hades, and that by requesting to drink from the waters of Memory instead of the traditional Lethe, you were setting

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40 Pind. Fr. 133.
41 Fairbanks, 252.
42 Albinus, 141.
43 Ibid., 142.
44 Ibid., 147.
yourself apart from the mass of souls as an initiate.46 Other examples are either variations of these instructions, informing the initiate that they are to refer to themselves as a “son of Earth and starry Sky,”47 or else invocations to the Chthonian Queen Persephone to accept the deceased as one of her own initiates and therefore accorded a special place in the afterlife.48

The ancient Greeks had an understanding of the topography of their underworld, albeit one that was based primarily on mythography and prose. While to a present-day audience the natural acceptance of such storylines as concerned with the nature of one’s eternal resting place may seem quite ludicrous, it must be remembered that Greek religion was deeply integrated in all aspects of culture. Although not considered to possess any canonical religious literature, the writings of Hesiod and Homer were as close as the Greeks came to a definitive religious narrative. As such, the acceptance of their belief systems set forth by these narratives should be looked at in the relative context of the society for which they were written. We can surmise that the Greeks really did believe that they would need to pay the ferryman in order to gain access to their eternal resting place, and that the heroes of Homeric epics were spared the tedium of a typical afterlife by translocation to Elysium.49

I have presented a definitive, yet by no means exhaustive, approach whereby scholars may enhance their understanding of the Greek underworld. By detailing the consecutive stages that one goes through following their bodily expiry, I have shown that the Greek understanding of immortality in death was well attested in the ancient sources. We do not have only one source detailing some of the aspects of the journey to the underworld, but actually a body of evidence that serves to both reinforce and enhance our knowledge of what transpired following death. However, just a detailed description of what awaits a soul in the afterlife is not enough to ensure preparedness, thus necessitating the creation of mystery cults and the tradition of the ‘Orphic’ gold tablets. Such guides to appropriate conduct in the realm of Hades and Persephone are invaluable to the study of Greek underworld topography, and offer an archaeological approach complementary to the literary evidence of Greek religious practices.

46 Ibid., 4-7.
47 Ibid., 23.
48 Ibid., 15.
49 Albinus, 88.