



ORPHIC TRADITION
and the
BIRTH OF THE GODS

DWAYNE A. MEISNER

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Preface

The topic of Orphism is a controversial one, and to many people it is enigmatic too. While some students and scholars might prefer to avoid Orphism and its controversies, there are a few others who bring outstanding expertise to the discussion. In fact, some of the biggest names in the fields of Greek literature and religion have written important works on this topic, such as the recently departed Walter Burkert and Martin West. And so, in order to research this bizarre ancient phenomenon we call Orphism, one must stand upon the shoulders of some of the biggest giants in Classical scholarship, and at the same time dive into the midst of one of the biggest debates on Greek religion. No wonder many shy away from it. However, as complicated and controversial as the topic of Orphism may appear, it is not incomprehensible. So with a humble recognition that there will be little certainty, I present a study of Orphic theogonies in the hopes that, whether or not I can contribute something valuable to the ongoing debates on Orphism, at least I can make this topic more accessible to those who have not dedicated years of their lives to researching it. “I will sing to those who know” (*OF* 1 B)—and hopefully in the process, this topic will catch the interest of those who do not know.

Having first become acquainted with scholarship on Orphism when I was doing research on the Dionysiac mysteries for my master’s thesis, I quickly became fascinated with the ongoing debates about Orphism as I read modern scholars from one end of the spectrum to another. Reading at the same time early scholars who saw Orphism as a unified religious movement and more recent and skeptical scholars who see it as mainly a literary phenomenon, I was never entirely convinced by either side of the argument. As a newcomer to the

modern discourse on Orphism, in a sense I have the advantage of a new perspective, neither weighed down by outdated models nor deeply involved in the process of deconstruction, but I also have the disadvantage of having far less expertise than some of the scholars who are already engaged in Orphic discourse. Therefore, this book is not an attempt to propose an alternative definition of Orphism, or to critique the brilliant work that has already been done on the Orphic gold tablets or the Derveni Papyrus. Instead, I concentrate on a set of fragments that has received less attention in recent years, by attempting to reconstruct four Orphic theogonies, based on the recent collection of the *Orphic Fragments* by Alberto Bernabé. I hope this book will contribute to discourse on Orphism by applying new models and interpretations to these often-neglected fragments, while also making that discourse more accessible to students and scholars who are new to the topic by explaining the Orphic literary tradition in the simplest terms possible.

This book is an adaptation of my doctoral thesis, which really did two things: first, it was a reconstruction of the literary history of Orphic theogonies, and that is the subject of this book; and second, it sought to explain the metaphysical allegories of the Neoplatonists who often referred to the Orphic Rhapsodies. These complex allegorical interpretations are the reason why we have more than two hundred fragments of the Rhapsodies, but few modern scholars have paid significant attention to explaining these interpretations and determining how the Neoplatonists manipulated their presentation of the text of the Rhapsodies. My work on Neoplatonic allegories has been mostly reserved for a future project, but it does come into play in this book when dealing with fragments from Neoplatonic sources. In every case I have endeavoured to keep the discussion of allegory as brief and simple as possible, always limited to that which is necessary for the reconstruction of the Orphic poems.

A note on translations: All translations of ancient texts are mine unless otherwise noted in the footnotes. Many of my translations have been done in consultation with recent published editions, and these are noted in the footnotes as well. Some of the modern sources I consulted while doing this study are in foreign languages (e.g., Lobeck in Latin, Brisson in French), and where these authors are quoted, I have translated them into English for the sake of readability, with few exceptions. These translations are also my own.

In the development of this monograph, I have received guidance and direction from various scholars to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. Since this project began as a doctoral thesis, the first person to acknowledge is Christopher G. Brown, my thesis supervisor whose philological expertise has directed me many times to texts and ideas that have profoundly shaped my arguments. A heartfelt thank you to Anne-France Morand, the only other Canadian scholar (as far as I know) who specializes in Orphism, for agreeing to be my external examiner and for always being willing to offer me valuable advice. Special thanks to Radcliffe Edmonds, for reviewing this book and

offering encouraging feedback. I am grateful for the thoughtful comments of the members of my thesis committees, including Bonnie MacLachlan, Charles Stocking, Bernd Steinbock, and Dan Smith; and the institutional support of the Department of Classics at the University of Western Ontario and Campion College at the University of Regina. During my doctoral degree, my research was supported by funding from the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Western Ontario, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship, and two scholarships awarded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Over the years, there have been many others who have contributed in some small way to the personal and professional development that have made this book possible. The first to be acknowledged is Ken Leyton-Brown, who acted as my advisor during my master's degree when I was studying the Dionysiac mysteries and since then has continued to be a valuable mentor and colleague. I appreciate the fact that my family and friends, and especially my wife, Amanda, have tolerated years of both geographical and personal isolation while I have spent large chunks of time on research. Somewhere within the cultural cluster of ideas and practices that included Orphic literature, Bacchic mysteries, and Platonic philosophy, the Greeks discovered something universal and inexpressable about human nature and about the universe. It is my hope that through this book some small fragment of that mystical discovery might become slightly more comprehensible to modern minds.

Abbreviations

Not all ancient authors and works are cited using abbreviations, but those that are abbreviated follow the format of citations used by Alberto Bernabé in his recent edition of *Poetae Epici Graeci: Testimonia et Fragmenta*, Pars II, Fasc. 1–3 (Leipzig: Teubner, 2004–2007). The abbreviations used most frequently are these:

OF # B	= # K (e.g., OF 243 B = 168 K): OF = <i>Orphicorum Fragmenta</i> (in some cases, OT = <i>Orphicorum Testimonia</i>); B = Bernabé; K = Kern.
DP	= Derveni Papyrus
HH	= <i>Homeric Hymns</i>
OH	= <i>Orphic Hymns</i>

Some scholarly journals, reference works, books with multiple authors, and collections of inscriptions and fragments are abbreviated as follows:

BNP	<i>Brill's New Pauly</i> (eds. H. Cancik, C. Salazar et al., Leiden: Brill, 2005; accessed at http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/brill-s-new-pauly)
CQ	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
D-K	H. Diels and W. Kranz (<i>Die Fragment der Vorsokratiker</i> , Vols. 1–2, 10th ed., Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1961)
FGrH	<i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> (ed. F. Jacoby et al., Leiden: Brill, 1923–1958)
GGM	<i>Geographi Graeci Minores</i> (ed. K. Müller, Hildesheim: G. Olms, [1855–1861] 1965)

- IG *Inscriptiones Graecae*, Vols. 1–12 (ed. O. Kern et al., Berlin: De Gruyter, 1913–2012)
- JHS *Journal of Hellenic Studies*
- KPT T. Kouremenos, G. Parássoglou, and K. Tsantsanoglou (*The Derveni Papyrus*, Florence: Casa Editrice Leo S. Olschki, 2006)
- KRS G. S. Kirk, J. Raven, and M. Schofield (*The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983)
- KTU *Keilalphabetische Texte aus Ugarit* (Ugaritic Baal Cycle; cited in Smith 1994; Smith and Pitard, 2009)
- LfgRE *Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos* (ed. B. Snell et al., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, [1982] 2004)
- LIMC *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (eds. H. Ackermann and J. R. Gisler, Zürich: Artemis, 1981–1997)
- LSJ Liddell-Scott-Jones (*Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)
- M-W R. Merkelbach and M. L. West (*Fragmenta Hesiodica*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967)
- PSI Pernigotti, C. (*Papiri della Società Italiana*, Vol. 15, Florence: Firenze University Press, 2008)
- SEG *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*. Vols. 1–60 (eds. A. Chaniotis et al., Leiden: Brill, 1923–2010)
- SVF *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*. Vols. 1–3 (ed. H. von Arnim, Stuttgart: Teubner, 1964 [1903–1905])
- TrGF *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*. Vols. 1–5 (eds. B. Snell et al., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971–2004)
- ZPE *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*

Introducing Orphic Theogonies

The aim of this study is to sort out the history, structure, and contents of four Orphic theogonies, in the hope that some of their major themes and concerns might be clarified. According to most modern reconstructions of Orphic literature by scholars such as Otto Kern, Martin West, and Alberto Bernabé, there were at least four major Orphic theogonies: (1) the “Derveni Theogony,” which is the poem underlying the commentary contained in the Derveni Papyrus (fourth century BC),¹ and three other Orphic theogonies known to the Neoplatonist Damascius (sixth century AD): (2) the “Eudemian Theogony” (fifth century BC), named after Eudemus, a student of Aristotle who made references to an Orphic theogony in his philosophical works;² (3) the “Hieronyman Theogony” (second century BC), a Hellenistic version known to two obscure authors named Hieronymus and Hellanicus;³ and (4) the Rhapsodies, or “Rhapsodic Theogony” (first century BC/AD), which was the longest version and the only one that Damascius considered current.⁴ The Derveni, Eudemian, Hieronyman, and Rhapsodic theogonies are preserved only in fragments by prose authors, mostly philosophers and apologists, and these fragments have been collected recently in Bernabé’s *Poetae Epici Graeci* in a way that reflects modern assumptions about what a Greek theogony might have looked like.⁵

1. Kouremenos, Parássoglou, and Tsantsanoglou 2006 (hereafter referred to as KPT); Bernabé 2007a. Other important editions are found in Janko 2002; Betegh 2004; and Tortorelli Ghidini 2006.

2. Damascius, *De Principiis* 124 (3.162.19 Westerink) (OF 20 I B = 24 K).

3. Damascius, *De Principiis* 123 bis (3.160.17 Westerink) (OF 69 I B = 54 K). These dates are disputable: Brisson (1995: 394–396) dates the Hieronyman theogony to the second century AD, but West (1983: 225–226) suggests that it was written shortly after the third century BC.

4. Damascius, *De Principiis* 123 (3.159.17 Westerink) (OF 90 B = 60 K); *Suda*, s.v. “Ὀρφεύς” (3.564.30 Adler) (OF 91 B = 223d K).

5. For all Orphic fragments, I rely on Bernabé’s collection of epic fragments in *Poetae Epici Graeci* (2004, 2006, 2007a), but I also consult the *Orphicorum Fragmenta* in Kern (1922) for textual comparison and history of scholarship. Fragments from Bernabé’s collection are cited as OF # B, and fragments from Kern’s collection as (OF) # K. For most fragments, I note first the original

Scholars have assumed that each of these theogonies was a lengthy, chronological narrative that stretched from the beginning of creation to the current state of the cosmos, similar to the format of Hesiod's *Theogony*. From this perspective, even though it seems clear that Orphic practitioners (whoever they might have been) used poetic texts in their rituals, it has been difficult to determine how a theogony of this type might have been used in ritual performance. If, on the other hand, Orphic theogonies were shorter narratives that functioned as hymns to particular gods, then instead we might call them theogonic hymns, similar to the *Homeric Hymns* in the sense that they describe the attributes of deities and narrate the way these deities stepped into their spheres of influence. If we view the texts in this way, then the particular performance contexts and varied purposes of these texts become far more complex than a lengthy theogony and the puzzle might become impossible to solve, but the basic function of these texts in ritual might become simpler to imagine in some cases. Many modern discussions about Orphic ritual have been driven by the controversy and confusion over what Orphism was. This confusion stems not only from our lack of knowledge about Orphic ritual, but also from our misunderstanding of the nature of the texts. Therefore, this study is about the texts. What were Orphic theogonies, and what role did they play in Orphism? And how does a reading of Orphic theogonies influence our definition of Orphism?

In this book, I attempt to reconstruct the history of Orphic theogonies based on Claude Lévi-Strauss' concept of bricolage.⁶ As I argue in this chapter, rather than viewing these theogonies through the rigid model of a manuscript tradition, it would be preferable to interpret each individual text or fragment as the original creation of a bricoleur: an anonymous author who drew from the elements of myth that were available at the time, and reconfigured these elements in a way that was relevant to the pseudepigrapher's particular context. Beginning with the Derveni theogony, I point out that it combines well-known elements of Hesiod's *Theogony* with elements of earlier Near Eastern mythology to create a profound but enigmatic narrative, centered around Zeus and the act of swallowing. Moving on to the Eudemian theogony, I argue that the scattered references to Orphic poetry in the works of Plato, Aristotle, and others do not necessarily refer to the same theogony, and even if they did, this did not necessarily mean that they contained the earliest renditions of the Orphic Hymn to Zeus or the story of Dionysus Zagreus. In chapter 4, I review our only two sources for the Hieronyman theogony and suggest that in this case we might actually be dealing with two separate poems. The scattered fragments of the three earliest Orphic theogonies suggest a varied and fluid tradition, in which

author, and then both Bernabé's and Kern's editions. For example: Damascius, *De Principiis* 124 (3.162.19 Westerink) (*OF* 20 I B = 24 K).

6. Lévi-Strauss 1966: 16–36.

the format and content of the poems were subject to change, since each poem was the individual product of the creativity of a bricoleur.

The fifth and sixth chapters concentrate on the Orphic Rhapsodies, which constitute the largest body of fragments because the text was still current at the time of the Neoplatonists. Responding to a recent argument by Radcliffe Edmonds that the Rhapsodies could have been a collection of twenty-four poems, rather than one poem in twenty-four books,⁷ I agree with Edmonds that this is possible, but I argue that one of these books must have contained a continuous narrative of six generations of divine rulers, with a particular emphasis on the character and actions of Phanes and Zeus, in addition to Dionysus. This emphasis on Phanes and Zeus forms the background of chapter 6, where I review both ancient and modern interpretations of the story of Dionysus Zagreus and his dismemberment by the Titans. Long thought to have been the central myth of the Orphic religion, this story has always been at the center of the modern debate on Orphism. One of the most controversial aspects of this story centers around its age: if the story was told in the Archaic Period, then it is more likely that it served as the central myth of Orphism; but more skeptical scholars have argued that certain elements of this myth were introduced later, by the Neoplatonist Olympiodorus (sixth century AD) or even by modern scholars. In chapter 6, I read the myth of Dionysus and the Titans in the one literary context where we are actually certain that it appeared: as one episode in the six-generation myth of the Orphic Rhapsodies. I conclude that in this context the myth reveals as much about Zeus as it does about Dionysus.

The Orphic Question

Whenever there is a discussion of Orphica, or whenever we label anything “Orphic,” underlying this designation are three interrelated topics: (a) a legend, (b) a set of ritual practices, and (c) a literary tradition.

(a) First, the legend is about the singer and musician Orpheus who appears in mainstream Greek mythology. This is the Orpheus whose music enchanted the animals and trees, who joined Jason and the Argonauts on their adventure and was able to out-sing the Sirens, and who used music to make his way through the underworld in an attempt to bring back his wife, Eurydice. The Orpheus of legend was known for his music since at least the sixth century BC, when the lyric poet Ibycus referred to him as “famous-named Orpheus.”⁸ While

7. Edmonds 2013: 148–159.

8. West (2011: 120–122) suggests that the Argonautic adventure appeared in the tenth or eleventh century BC, based on the -εὐς ending found on Linear B tablets (cf. Atreus, Odysseus). But note the form Ὀρφῆς in Ibycus, fr. 306 Page (Priscian. *Inst.* 6.92). A fragment of Simonides (fr. 384 Page) refers to the enchanting effect of Orpheus’ music on nature, and Orpheus’ name appears

the legend of Orpheus the Argonaut had early roots, the earliest evidence of his katabasis does not appear until the fifth century, in a brief passage of Euripides' *Alcestis* (962–966). In this passage, Orpheus is successful in bringing his wife back from the dead, but in other early versions of his katabasis, such as the one mentioned in Plato's *Symposium*, he fails to do this for one reason or another.⁹ Because of the mystical quality of his music and because of his experiences in the underworld, by the fifth century the legendary figure of Orpheus was considered an appropriate culture hero for the foundation of mystery cults.¹⁰

(b) The role of Orpheus as a culture hero in Greek legend is the focus of the second topic labeled “Orphic,” which consists of the cult practices he was believed to have founded. Here he is the subject of a debate that has continued for nearly two centuries about the nature and existence of what earlier scholars called “Orphism”—that is, a group of religious communities who practised a reformed version of Greek religion that they believed to have been founded by Orpheus, and to have used Orphic texts as scriptures. Despite the opinions of earlier scholars,¹¹ it is now generally believed that this type of Orphism never existed as a definable institution or religious community. More skeptical scholars prefer to speak only of an Orphic literary tradition, but recently it has also become acceptable to speak of “Orphics” in the sense of ritual practitioners who used Orphic texts or adhered to Orphic doctrines. The Orphics were neither a distinct, coherent sect nor authors in a strictly literary tradition but, as the shifting debates have gradually been making clear, they were something in between. Whatever conclusions we may draw about the nature of “Orphism,” one of its most important distinguishing features, if indeed it existed, might have been the use of texts in ritual.

(c) The third component of a discussion of Orphica is about those very texts. Certain literary works were ascribed to Orpheus as a way of attaching prophetic authority to the texts, and they featured certain mythical themes that differed somewhat from the mainstream tradition. While the idea of an Orphic religious community has long been debated, the existence of a tradition of Orphic texts is indisputable. Some of the texts are extant, such as the eighty-seven *Orphic Hymns* addressed to a wide variety of deities (possibly from the second century AD)¹² and the *Orphic Argonautica*, a 1,400-line hexameter poem in which Orpheus tells his own story (fourth century AD).¹³ But most of

on a sixth-century relief sculpture depicting the Argonauts (Christopoulos 1991: 213n16; Robbins 1982: 5–7).

9. Orpheus fails either because of his lack of heroic manliness, as in Plato's *Symposium* 179d–e, or because he looks back at Eurydice, as in later versions (Vergil, *Georgics* 4.457–527; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.1–85).

10. E.g., in Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1032; see Linforth 1941: 35–38; Graf 1974: 22–39.

11. E.g., Creuzer 1822; Macchiore 1930.

12. Ricciardelli 2000: xxx–xxx; Morand 2001: 35; Fayant 2014: xxix–xxx.

13. Vian 1987.

the Orphic literary tradition exists now only in fragments, including theogonic poetry ranging from the Derveni Papyrus (fourth century BC) to the Orphic Rhapsodies (first century BC/AD);¹⁴ a series of gold tablets inscribed with eschatological material and found in graves (fourth century BC to second century AD);¹⁵ other Orphic works known to us by little more than their titles, such as the *Krater*, *Net*, and *Robe*; and a katabasis of Orpheus that is believed to have been circulating by the fifth century BC.¹⁶ Most of the theogonic fragments are contained in commentaries of Platonic texts, written by Neoplatonic philosophers (fourth to sixth centuries AD) who certainly did not identify themselves as “Orphic,” nor were they members of a sect called “Orphism,” but they made frequent references to hexametric poetry about the gods, and they said that the author of these poems was Orpheus, in the same way that they referred to Homeric poetry and said the author was Homer.¹⁷ These authors applied allegorical interpretations to the texts in ways that supported their own philosophical views, so it is often difficult to disentangle one of their allegorical interpretations from the text that stood behind it, but it is because of the Neoplatonists that most of our fragments of Orphic literature have been preserved.

In this study, the word “Orphism” usually refers to a religious sect that, whether or not it actually existed, was misrepresented by earlier generations of modern scholars, and the word “Orphic” refers to either rituals or texts whose origin or authorship was for some reason ascribed to Orpheus. The word “Orphic” might also refer to an individual or group who used these texts and rituals, or to the anonymous author of an Orphic poem, but this does not necessarily imply membership in a sect called “Orphism.” If there ever was such a thing as Orphism, its members would have practiced Orphic rituals in which they used Orphic texts, and they might have called themselves Orphic. But if there was never such a thing as Orphism, then there were still Greek individuals who practiced Orphic rituals with the use of Orphic texts, and these

14. West (1983: 75–79) and Betegh (2004: 61) date the Derveni Papyrus to the late fifth or early fourth century BC. The date of the *Rhapsodies* is disputed, with suggestions ranging from the sixth century BC to the second century AD (West 1983: 261; Bernabé 2004: 97).

15. For place, date, and text of each individual gold tablet, see Graf and Johnston 2013: 4–47; Bernabé and San Cristóbal 2008: 241–272. Most of these were discovered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries AD, but more gold tablets continue to be discovered.

16. *OF* 409–412 B (*Krater*), *OF* 403–405 B (*Net*), *OF* 406–407 B (*Robe*); see also *Lyre* (*OF* 417–420 B) and *Katabasis* (*OF* 707–717 B); *Suda*, s.v. “Ὀρφεύς” (3.564–565 Adler); West 1983: 10–13.

17. E.g., Proclus, in *Plat. Remp.* 2.74.26 Kroll (*OF* 159 B = 140 K): “the theologian Orpheus taught/handed down”; Proclus, in *Plat. Remp.* 2.207.23 Kroll (*OF* 176 B = 126 K): “Orpheus says”; Olympiodorus, in *Plat. Phaed.* 1.3 (41 Westerink) (*OF* 190 II B = 107, 220 K): “from Orpheus ... [they] are taught/handed down.” Hermias, in *Plat. Phaedr.* 146.28 Couvr. (*OF* 128 II B = 90 K) refers to both Homer and Orpheus as “inspired poets.” Orpheus was associated with Homer and Hesiod as one of the great poets since the fifth and fourth centuries BC (Linforth 1941: 104). Brisson (1995: 53–54) counts 176 references to Orphic texts in Proclus, 139 appearing in his *Timaeus* commentary alone.

people could be reasonably referred to as Orphics. Although there must have been some common ground among the Orphics, the specific way in which these texts were used was probably different to some extent in each individual case, suited to the needs of each particular individual or group, with the result that a search for a coherently unified community is not likely to succeed. However, it is worthwhile considering the nature and content of Orphic texts and inquiring about how they were used in Orphic ritual, because whether or not there were Orphic communities, this seems to have been what people were doing with the texts.

Therefore, the “Orphic Question,” so to speak, is whether, to what extent, and in what ways Orphic texts were used in Greek ritual. There were certain ritual contexts such as mystery initiations, funeral arrangements, and acts of personal devotion, in which Greeks at different times and places made use of texts ascribed to Orpheus, either as individuals or in groups. On this basic point most scholars would agree, but the question of what specific role these texts had to play in ritual has sparked one of the greatest debates in modern scholarship on ancient Greek religion. The debate began in the 1820s with Friedrich Creuzer and Christian August Lobeck. Creuzer viewed Orpheus as a major reformer from the east who revolutionized Greek religion, but Lobeck took a more cautious position with his monumental work *Aglaophamus*.¹⁸ The basic points of their disagreement characterized the debate into the early twentieth century, as scholars became divided between maximalists and minimalists, or as they have been recently characterized, “PanOrphists” and “Orpheoskeptics.”¹⁹ Prominent representatives of the PanOrphists included Otto Kern, who saw Orpheus as the prophet of a religious movement, and Macchioro, according to whom Orphism was a religious community and a prototype of early Christian communities.²⁰ Two of the most important Orpheoskeptics were Wilamowitz, who questioned the connection between Orphism and the Bacchic mysteries, and Linforth, who in 1941 denied that there was ever a coherent sect known as Orphism. The Greek word Ὀρφικά, as Linforth understood it, referred strictly to materials belonging to a literary tradition.²¹ He essentially disproved the existence of Orphism as a distinct, definable religious community, leading Dodds to admit a few years later that he had “lost a great deal of knowledge,” because this “edifice reared by an ingenious scholarship” turned out to be a “house of dreams.”²²

18. Creuzer 1822; Lobeck 1829; see Graf and Johnston 2013: 51.

19. Edmonds 2011c: 4–8.

20. Kern 1888: 52; Macchioro 1930: 100–135.

21. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1932) 1959: 2:190–205; Linforth 1941: ix–xiii, 169–173, 305–306.

22. Dodds 1951: 147–148.

Since then, scholars have been more cautious about attempting to define Orphism or claiming that it had any strong affinities with early Christianity. Recent studies by Herrero and Jourdan focus instead on the different ways Christian apologists talked about Orphic texts, ranging from the appropriation of ideas and images to the negative critique of Orphic myth.²³ But with regard to Orphism itself, the relationship between text and ritual remains an open question. There are still those who tend toward a minimalist position, such as Edmonds, who denies the existence of a religious community and expresses skepticism about labeling the gold tablets “Orphic,” and those who tend toward a maximalist position, such as Bernabé, who argues that the gold tablets “can only be Orphic” because they belong to the same “religious movement,” which therefore must have existed.²⁴ To the less skeptical scholar today, there was not so much a sect called Orphism as a collection of different scattered groups or individuals who practised certain types of rituals, people who in some way made use of Orphic texts. In general, most scholars aim for the middle road,²⁵ rejecting the existence of Orphic communities but accepting that in some way the texts ascribed to Orpheus were written for and used in a ritual context, closely related to some of the mystery cults.

Since the time of Linforth, scholarly discussions of Orphic materials have largely focused on the interpretation of new evidence that has come to light. The Derveni Papyrus, Olbia bone tablets, and Orphic gold tablets are some of the very few archaeological records of Orphic cult activity, but in each case the precise nature of their creation and use remains tantalizingly enigmatic. Of primary importance is the Derveni Papyrus, a partially burned papyrus scroll that was discovered in the remains of a funeral pyre in 1962. It is a remarkable text for many reasons: the earliest surviving papyrus from Greece (fourth century BC), it preserves the earliest extant fragments of Orphic poetry (sixth century BC). The Derveni author quotes an Orphic theogony that differs from Hesiod’s account on a few important points, and he applies his own unique version of Presocratic philosophy to an allegorical interpretation of the text.²⁶ The Derveni Papyrus is the oldest surviving piece of Orphic literature, and it is a puzzling but important text, so naturally it has been in the spotlight of scholarly attention for the last few decades. Another fascinating discovery was a set of bone tablets found in an excavation at Olbia in 1978. The inscribed words “life death life” and “Dio(nysos) Orphic [or Orphics]” on one of the tablets confirm an association between Orpheus and Bacchic cult, and they reveal an interest

23. Jourdan 2006, 2008; Herrero 2010.

24. Edmonds 1999: 35–73; 2011b: 257–270; Bernabé 2011: 68–101.

25. E.g., Burkert 1982; Graf and Johnston 2013.

26. West 1983: 75–79; Betegh 2004: 56–134; Bernabé 2007b: 99–133.

in eschatology.²⁷ The bone tablets supply important evidence on Orphic ritual, but we still have no idea about their original purpose.

Although some of the Orphic gold tablets were first discovered in the early nineteenth century, even now archaeologists continue to find gold tablets in graves.²⁸ Yet the reason why interest has been shown in them is not simply that they are new discoveries, but that the content of the tablets is at the center of the debate on Orphism. Since the first scholarly edition of the Petelia (*OF* 476 B) and Thurii (*OF* 487–490 B) tablets was published by Smith and Comparetti in 1882, the tablets have often been associated with Orphic and Bacchic cult, and scholars have considered them as evidence of an eschatological concern in Orphism.²⁹ This view has been challenged by various scholars, including Zuntz, who in 1971 argued that they were not Orphic but Pythagorean. Zuntz pointed out that none of the tablets that had yet been discovered made any reference to Dionysus, but Persephone appears in three of them (either by name or as the “chthonian queen”), so he associated the tablets with the cult of Persephone in southern Italy and Sicily.³⁰ However, very soon after the publication of Zuntz’s *Persephone*, two tablets were discovered in Thessaly that clearly demonstrated an association between Dionysus and one of the cults that produced the tablets. The Hipponion tablet, discovered in 1973, promises the dead initiate that she “will go along the sacred road on which other glorious initiates and Bacchoi travel.” The ivy-shaped Pelinna tablets, discovered in 1987, instruct the initiate to “tell Persephone that the Bacchic one himself has released you.”³¹ The discovery of these tablets raised again the possibility that they were artifacts produced in an Orphic cult. As a result, the connection between the gold tablets and Orpheus has been established as at least a strong possibility in the Classical Period. This has led to extensive discussion of the relevance of these texts to Orphic thought and practice.

Among the many reasons why the gold tablets have attracted so much attention is that they seem to refer to two topics that are central to what modern scholars have perceived as Orphism. First, there is eschatology: because Orpheus had gone to the underworld to rescue his wife, Eurydice, it was believed that he had obtained special knowledge of the afterlife, and that this

27. West 1982: 17–29; Betegh 2004: 344. According to Graf and Johnston (2013: 214–215), Tablet A reads βίος θάνατος βίος at the top and Διό(νυσος) Ὀρφικοί (or Ὀρφικόν—they note that “the edge is damaged”); cf. *OF* 463–465 B.

28. The Petelia tablet was discovered in 1836, but not published until 1882 (Smith and Comparetti 1882: 111). Most recently, eleven tablets from Roman Palestine (second century AD) have been published by Graf and Johnston 2013: 208–213.

29. Smith and Comparetti 1882: 111–118.

30. Zuntz 1971: 277–286, 381–393; *OF* 488–490 B (Zuntz A1–3). Linforth never mentions the tablets in his *Arts of Orpheus* (Linforth 1941), and West (1983: 26) and Edmonds (2004: 36–37; 2011b: 257–260) question their Orphic provenance.

31. *OF* 474.15–16, 485.2 B; cf. *OF* 486.2 B. For more on these tablets, see Bernabé and San Cristóbal 2008: 9–94.

knowledge was preserved in his poetry. The Greeks associated Orpheus with mystery cults as their legendary founder, so because a concern with the afterlife seemed important in mystery cults, scholars concluded that Orphism was also concerned with the afterlife. The gold tablets appear to confirm this conclusion because they direct the initiate to take the proper route on his or her journey through the underworld and to say the proper words to the guardians by the spring of Memory when they arrive.³² Second, there is anthropogony, for the statement “I am a child of Earth and starry Sky” on some of the gold tablets (*OF* 474–484 B) has been taken to refer to the origin of humanity out of the ashes of the Titans, if the gold tablets are interpreted according to the modern reconstruction of the myth of Dionysus Zagreus. This reconstruction is as follows: the Titans lure Dionysus toward them with toys; they kill, boil, roast, and eat him; but this angers Zeus, who strikes them with his lightning bolt. After this punishment, human beings are created out of their ashes, while Dionysus is brought back to life by the other gods. Thus we have a heavenly, Dionysiac nature and an earthly, Titanic nature, and the point of initiation is to overcome our Titanic nature. This is how Comparetti interpreted the statement “I am a child of Earth and starry Sky” in the gold tablets—“Earth” referring to the Titanic nature and “starry Sky” referring to the Dionysiac—and recent scholars have continued to suggest this interpretation.³³ But Edmonds has become convinced that this concept of “original sin,” which seems inherent in the idea of a Titanic nature in humanity, is an invention of modern scholars. Edmonds argues that the myth of Dionysus Zagreus was not nearly as central to Orphic thought as modern scholars have assumed, and largely on this basis he rejects the notion that the gold tablets refer to the Zagreus myth. He expresses doubts about whether the tablets had anything to do with Orpheus, and he refers to them as “the so-called Orphic gold tablets,” even placing “Orphic” in quotation marks in his book title.³⁴

It is to these two subjects—eschatology and the connection with Dionysus—that most scholarly attention has been paid in the Orphic debate in recent years, even if (in some cases) only for the sake of deconstruction, and this is largely a consequence of the way Orphism was described a century ago. It was expected that Orphism, seen as a sort of proto-Christianity, would be concerned with such concepts as original sin and the afterlife, that mystery cults would offer salvation from an afterlife of punishment, and that these

32. On the katabasis of Orpheus, see Clark 1979: 95–124. On Orpheus as a poetic founder of mysteries, see Graf 1974: 1–39; Brisson 1995: 2870–2872. On the gold tablets providing instructions for the underworld journey, see Edmonds 2004: 29–109; Bernabé and San Cristóbal 2008; Graf and Johnston 2013: 94–166.

33. Smith and Comparetti 1882: 116; Detienne 1979: 68–72; Christopoulos 1991: 217–218; Bernabé and San Cristóbal 2008: 38–47; Bernabé 2011: 77; Graf and Johnston 2013: 58–61.

34. Edmonds 1999: 35–73; 2009: 511–532; 2013: 296–390. He is expanding on the same point made by Linforth (1941: 359–362).

ideas would revolve around the story of a god who is killed and brought back to life. More recent scholars have rejected this conception of Orphism, and they cautiously refer to the use of Orphic texts in rituals, but much of the discussion has remained focused on eschatology and Dionysus. This has perhaps led to an imbalance in the scholarship, since most Orphic evidence we have is actually of a different nature: theogonic poetry, hymns to various deities, the legends of the Argonauts, and a wide variety of other material.

Therefore, Edmonds has a valid point in arguing that the Zagreus myth was not as central to Orphic myth as scholars once thought, and that it did not contain an idea of original sin. It was not the central myth of a religious institution called Orphism, even though the fact remains that the most extensive set of Orphic theogonic poetry, referred to as the Rhapsodies, seems to have ended with the story of Dionysus and the Titans. Whether this episode has any anthropogonic or eschatological significance is open to discussion, but first and foremost, as I argue in chapter 6, the myth's significance is theogonic. Zeus sets up Dionysus as the last of a six-generation succession of kings, but before Dionysus can claim his rightful position, the Titans kill him and eat him. However, Athena preserves his heart, Apollo gathers and buries his remains, and Zeus brings him back to life. Dionysus takes his place of honour among the Olympians, but Zeus remains the king of the gods.³⁵ It appears that this myth draws the succession myth to a close, putting an end to a series of challenges to the royal power of Zeus. If this is the case, then the story might have little to do with anthropogony, at least in the context of the Rhapsodic narrative.

Whether or not it was central to Orphic doctrine (if indeed there was such a thing as Orphic doctrine), the myth of Dionysus Zagreus was just one of the episodes in the Rhapsodies—one of the most important and climactic episodes, to be sure—but it was just one episode. The Rhapsodies themselves were just one of a group of Orphic theogonic poems in which Dionysus may or may not have played some kind of role. And theogonies were just one of the genres represented in Orphic poetry. Likewise, although Dionysus is one of the most frequently mentioned deities who appear in the *Orphic Hymns*, he is still just one of many. He appears in typical Dionysiac roles in *OH* 45–54: the reveling wine god, raised at Nysa and returning from the east to establish his triennial festivals, leading his company of maenads as he brandishes his thyrsus. There are references to chthonic Dionysus as the son of Persephone in the *Orphic Hymns*, and some of the *Hymns* have clear resonances with the presentation of Dionysus in the Rhapsodies, but neither his dismemberment by the Titans

35. *OF* 280–336 B. There seem to have been a few different versions of Dionysus' resurrection, which may or may not include the following elements: Athena takes his heart (*OF* 315, 325 B); Apollo gathers up Dionysus' remains (*OF* 305 B); Zeus entrusts Apollo to bury Dionysus (*OF* 322 B); Zeus puts Dionysus' heart into a statue (*OF* 325 B).

nor the name of Zagreus is explicitly mentioned.³⁶ Some of the *Orphic Hymns* are addressed to chthonic deities, and some fragments of the Rhapsodies deal with the fate of souls and the underworld, but there is not as much emphasis on eschatological matters in either the *Orphic Hymns* or the Rhapsodies as the modern reconstruction of Orphism would lead one to expect.³⁷ These topics occupy a small portion of the fragments, while the vast majority of our sources on Orphic literature concentrate on material that is quite different.

Nevertheless, scholars who lean toward more maximalist positions argue that the Zagreus myth, although it did not contain an idea of original sin, still existed from an early time and was one of the unifying themes of Orphic doctrine. Fritz Graf argues that early Orphic ritual, although it was “more diffuse” than in later periods, was “also reflected in a common myth [i.e., the Zagreus myth], the result of mythical *bricolage* in the late sixth century.”³⁸ While acknowledging that there was no monolithic Orphic religion and that other myths, such as Zeus swallowing Phanes, were just as important to Orphic literary tradition as the Zagreus myth, Graf nevertheless argues that Dionysus was one of the common threads by which Orphic beliefs and practices “had clear contours and were much more than the weird and incoherent phenomena contemporary minimalists [i.e., Edmonds] claim them to be.”³⁹ Likewise, Alberto Bernabé collects fragments that seem to him to contain *doctrinae* that agree with other *Orphica*, even if the ancient authors do not specifically attest that they have an Orphic source. He does not think that Orphism can be defined as a coherent set of doctrines, but he still argues that doctrines are central to defining Orphism. Bernabé acknowledges that because of the variety of Orphic texts and practitioners, “the doctrines found in different passages of the Orphic corpus will not be one and the same,” but this is “counterweighed by the fact that the name of the mythical poet was associated with specific themes.”⁴⁰ In other words, the specific doctrines of any two Orphic texts may not agree on every detail, but Orphism is defined by a set of doctrinal topics, such as cosmogony, eschatology, and anthropogony. More precisely, Bernabé and San Cristóbal see Orphism as the only explanation for combining elements that can also be found in the Eleusinian and Bacchic

36. *OH* 24.10–11, 29.8; cf. *OH* 30.6–7. Morand 2001: 209–217. Dionysus’ death is implied in the epithet “thrice-born” in *OH* 30.2. The *Orphic Hymn* to the Titans refers to them as “ancestors of our fathers” (37.2), but this might refer to their typical position as the generation of deities that precedes the Olympians.

37. *OH* 1 (Hecate), *OH* 18 (Plouton), *OH* 29 (Persephone), *OH* 53 (chthonic Dionysus), *OH* 57 (chthonic Hermes; cf. *OH* 28), *OH* 87 (Death); *OF* 337–350 B. For more on eschatology and the *Orphic Hymns*, see Morand 2001: 209–230.

38. Graf and Johnston 2013: 191. The term “bricolage” is discussed in detail further below: Graf sees the Zagreus myth as a single act of bricolage in the sixth century BC, but I present Orphic theogonies as a series of different acts of bricolage over the course of a few centuries.

39. Graf and Johnston 2013: 192–193.

40. Bernabé 2010: 422; cf. Bernabé 2004: vii–x; Herrero 2010: 20–24.

mysteries and in Pythagoreanism.⁴¹ Thus Orphism would consist of a cluster of loosely related mythical motifs and discussions of doctrinal topics.

On the minimalist side of the debate, Edmonds takes issue with scholars who define Orphism as a set of doctrines. Rejecting the idea of an “Orphic exception” to the general rule that ancient religion was not about beliefs, he argues that a definition of Orphism on the basis of doctrines still relies on an “implicit model of doctrinal Christianity.” This implicit model contradicts the most basic principles of Greek myth and ritual, which were far more about “loose thematic associations” and “collective ritual performances” than about “systematic theology.” Edmonds attempts to construct a more “polythetic” definition of Orphism that relies on “a loose collection of features, none of which are necessary or sufficient,” rather than a static set of doctrines. Ancient authors labeled a text or practice as Orphic because it shared in one or more of certain features, not all of which were necessary, but all of which had different levels of “cue validity” at different times. This means that the particular features of Orphism that appear in ancient texts differ from one period to the next, with shifting contexts and motivations. For example, “extra-ordinary purity” was an important cue for practitioners in the early period, but the “extreme antiquity” of Orphic poetry was a more important cue to the later Neoplatonists.⁴² Edmonds suggests the following definition, claiming that it renders a more accurate reflection of how things were labeled “Orphic” by ancient authors:

A text, a myth, a ritual, may be considered Orphic because it is explicitly so labeled (by its author or by an ancient witness), but also because it is marked as extra-ordinary in the same ways as other things explicitly connected with the name of Orpheus and grouped together with them in the ancient evidence. The more marked something is by claims to extra-ordinary purity or sanctity, by claims to special divine connection or extreme antiquity, or by features of extra-ordinary strangeness, perversity, or alien nature, the more likely it is to be labeled Orphic in the ancient evidence.⁴³

The features of “extra-ordinary purity or sanctity” refer mostly to the *orpheotelestai* and their clients in the Classical Period, who sought an enhanced state of purity with the gods. The “claims to special divine connection or extreme antiquity” have to do with the reasons why a text was attributed to Orpheus. From the perspectives of the Neoplatonists and Christian apologists of late antiquity, the divine connection and extreme antiquity of Orpheus were their justifications for using Orphic texts to represent the entire Greek tradition. The “features of

41. Bernabé and San Cristóbal 2008: 179–206.

42. Edmonds 2013: 68–69, 71, 82.

43. Edmonds 2013: 71.

extra-ordinary strangeness, perversity, or alien nature” are most relevant to the content of the texts in Orphic literary tradition. According to Edmonds’ definition, Orphic texts, including theogonies, were labeled Orphic in part because of their strange, perverse, and alien contents.

This proposed definition of “Orphica” has potential, but it needs to be refined. It represents progress by moving beyond the doctrinal hypothesis, because it does not rely on modern reconstructions based on Christian models and because it takes into account the wide range of features that characterized Orphic texts and practices at different places and times. However, at least as far as it concerns Orphic literature, one could produce more precise terms than “features of extra-ordinary strangeness, perversity, or alien nature.” In a forthcoming article, Edmonds begins to address this problem by observing that Orphic poets added certain types of material that was intended to make their poetry appear more authoritative than Hesiod. They reduplicated the most shocking Hesiodic motifs; for example, in the Rhapsodies Kronos castrates Ouranos but then is castrated by Zeus. They added additional primordial deities to the beginning of the cosmogony, included more extreme and perverse acts of sexuality and violence in certain episodes, and at the climax of the narratives assigned to Zeus a more absolute power than he has in Hesiod. In other words, Edmonds takes his original definition a step further, observing specific ways in which Orphic theogonies are strange, perverse, or extra-ordinary.⁴⁴ I do not disagree with Edmonds (and indeed, I draw similar conclusions), but here I add a few more points to the discussion by suggesting other features of Orphic literature that might have generated differences from Hesiod. The obvious blending of Greek with Near Eastern elements, the generic category of theogonic hymns, and the discourse between Orphic myth and philosophy might help to explain the prominence of Phanes and Night, the image of Zeus having the universe in his belly, and the well-known story of the death of Dionysus.

Compared to discussions of the gold tablets and the Derveni Papyrus, relatively little has been written about Orphic theogonies in recent years. The most recent edition of the Orphic fragments (Bernabé’s *Poetae Epici Graeci*) includes the four major theogonies mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: Derveni, Eudemian, Hieronyman, and Rhapsodic. The most comprehensive discussion in English of Orphic theogonies continues to be Martin West’s *The Orphic Poems*, but his analysis is problematic, partly because his list of theogonies is not the same as Bernabé’s. West discusses most of the fragments in detail and attempts to reconstruct not only the individual theogonies, but also a stemma for the entire tradition of Orphic theogonies, suggesting that the author of the Rhapsodies simply copied and compiled the material of three

44. Edmonds, forthcoming. Special thanks to Edmonds for sharing with me this unfinished article.

earlier Orphic theogonies, uniting them into one poem.⁴⁵ West attempts to demonstrate that there is a genealogical relationship between, for example, the Derveni theogony, the Eudemian theogony, and the Rhapsodies, by suggesting the existence of two more theogonies to fill in the gaps: the Protogonos and Cyclic theogonies. However, West's genealogical methodology relies upon a lot of conjecture and disallows a level of originality and variety in the texts. His approach has received criticism from other scholars, notably Luc Brisson, who points out that West's reconstruction assumes the existence of two theogonies for which there is no evidence (Protogonos and Cyclic).⁴⁶ Brisson prefers to see only three theogonies (ancient, Rhapsodic, Hieronyman), and he suggests that the best way to come to terms with the fragments is "to choose some sure points of reference."⁴⁷ He chooses primordial deities as his main point of reference. Night is the primordial deity in "la version ancienne," which to Brisson consists of both the Derveni and Eudemian theogonies: he sees these as identical precisely because Night is the primordial deity in both. He suggests that the figure of Chronos was introduced into the Rhapsodic and Hieronyman theogonies to replace the figure of Night in the ancient version, perhaps in an attempt to reconcile Orphic theogony with Stoic allegory and with Homer and Hesiod.⁴⁸ This suggests that the Rhapsodic and Hieronyman theogonies were no mere compilations of previous Orphic poetry, but adaptations in which changes were freely made to adjust the theogony to the author's historical and ideological context.

In a manner similar to West, Janko and Riedweg argue that the Orphic gold tablets were derived from an original Orphic text about eschatology, and they attempt to reconstruct this poem by assembling the individual items on the gold tablets into one complete narrative. Despite the coherence of their arguments, the results of their two investigations are not identical.⁴⁹ As with West's method, their conclusions require some conjecture, so some scholars

45. West 1983: 69, 246–249; see especially the diagram on page 264.

46. Brisson 1995: 398–402. West (1983: 121–126) suggests the Cyclic theogony to account for certain points of divergence between Apollodorus and Orphic theogonies, but Brisson (1995: 405–406) argues that these points can be explained by reference to Hesiod. See also Calame (1991: 229), who criticizes West's attempts to reconstruct an "Urform."

47. Brisson 1995: 390–396, 413. Brisson's chronology is followed by Fayant (2014: xx–xxiii), but West and Bernabé place the Hieronyman theogony before the Rhapsodies.

48. Brisson 1995: 390, 410–412. He argues that the Hieronyman theogony attempts to reconcile Orphic theogony with Homer and Hesiod (Brisson 1995: 395), and that the inclusion of Chronos in the Rhapsodies (and thus later in the Hieronyman theogony) is due to the influence of Mithraism (Brisson 1995: 37–55, 2887). However, the appearance of Chronos in a theogony might go back to Pherecydes (sixth century BC), who equated Chronos with Kronos and depicted him as a primordial deity who initiates cosmogony (Pherecydes, fr. 14, 60 Schibli = 7 A1, A8 D-K; Schibli 1990: 135–139).

49. Janko 1984: 89–100; Riedweg 1998: 359–398; 2011: 219–256. The view that the gold tablets were taken from an Orphic poem is as old as Smith and Comparetti (1882: 117). Bernabé and San Cristóbal (2008: 180–181) find Riedweg's reconstruction "highly convincing."

have applied a different model of interpretation to the gold tablets. Graf and Johnston view the gold tablets as vital evidence of Orphic ritual, and Edmonds remains skeptical about whether they should even be considered Orphic, but all three agree that in each individual case, the gold tablets are products of bricolage, based on the theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss.⁵⁰ In its simplest terms, bricolage in this context means that the individual practitioner who produced any given tablet chose different elements of texts or rituals or both, out of the wider field of current possibilities offered by ritual and myth, and put them together in an imaginative and original way that was relevant to the specific time and place of the burial in question. In this sense, the production of gold tablets was no different from any other Greek myth or ritual, for indeed bricolage was the basic mode of production for all Greek religion, which was in no way uniform from one city or deity to the next. But this simply confirms the necessary result of such an action, which is that, despite the overarching thematic similarity of the gold tablets, each one is different in some way or another. Whether the texts of the gold tablets were composed on the basis of a written text, memories of ritual actions, the original imagination of the author, or a mixture of these (which is the most likely scenario), each one is the unique, creative product of the efforts of an individual bricoleur.

In the case of Orphic theogonies, rather than attempting to trace a stemma of successive generations of texts, a better method of analysis would be to approach each fragment of each theogony, or even each element or episode included in a theogony—anything that Brisson's method might consider a sure point of reference—as an individual product or element of bricolage. Lévi-Strauss used the concept of bricolage to explain “mythical thought” by means of an analogy with the bricoleur who creates art “on the technical plane.” Unlike an artisan or engineer, the bricoleur’s “universe of instruments is closed,” so he or she must always “make do with ‘whatever is at hand,’ that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous.”⁵¹ The bricoleur is always limited by a set of “constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization,” so the creations of bricolage “always really consist of a new arrangement of elements.” These elements are “an already existent set” of “odds and ends,” with which the bricoleur engages “in a sort of dialogue,” by rearranging them in order to “find them a meaning” by the creation of new structures.⁵² Lévi-Strauss concludes that “the significant images of myth, the materials of the bricoleur, are elements which can be defined by two criteria: they have had a use, as words in a piece of discourse which mythical thought ‘detaches’ in the same way as a bricoleur ... detaches the cogwheels

50. Edmonds 2004: 4, 27, 238; Graf and Johnston 2013: 73–93, 184; Lévi-Strauss 1966: 16–36.

51. Lévi-Strauss 1966: 17.

52. Lévi-Strauss 1966: 18–22.

of an old alarm clock; and they can be used again either for the same purpose or for a different one if they are at all diverted from their previous function.”⁵³

By viewing the Orphic pseudepigraphers who wrote theogonic poetry as bricoleurs who rearranged the “odds and ends” of mythical events at their disposal into a new arrangement of structures, I approach Orphic theogonies as products of bricolage. This approach is in accord with how the concept of bricolage has been applied to the gold tablets, and it is beneficial to an interpretation of Orphic theogonies in three ways. First, since scholars have become more receptive to the idea that Orphism was never a coherent, definable religious community, a useful approach will be one that allows more possibilities for diversity. Brisson has taken the first step by rejecting West’s stemma and suggesting points of reference, but one can go further by exploring how these points of reference were rearranged in their individual contexts as the “odds and ends” of bricolage. Second, a bricoleur takes elements from a “finite” but “heterogeneous” field of possibilities, which opens the door to a wide but limited range of sources and influences that could have contributed to the individual works in question. Not all of these are typically considered Orphic: among the possible sources for an Orphic mythical motif are Near Eastern myths, Hesiod and other mainstream literary texts (e.g., Pindar, Aeschylus, Aristophanes), and material from other overlapping categories and elements that are typically associated with Orphic myth and ritual, such as those derived from Eleusinian, Dionysiac, or Pythagorean contexts; in other words, they are derived from more sources than just earlier Orphic theogonies. Third, if we apply the concept of bricolage to the ancient sources themselves—that is, to the ancient authors who quoted the theogonies, such as the Derveni author, Plato, the Neoplatonists, and the Christian apologists—then it becomes clear that their own decisions about what material to include and how to interpret this material were also exercises in bricolage.

One result of my reading of Orphic theogonies as products of bricolage is that, in most cases, it appears that Orphic theogonies may not have been lengthy, comprehensive narratives like Hesiod’s *Theogony*, as modern scholars such as West and Bernabé have assumed. Rather, they were shorter poems, analogous to the *Homeric Hymns*, which concentrate on one deity and how he or she came to a position of honour within the Greek pantheon. On this point, again I attempt to improve upon Edmonds’ recent efforts to redefine ancient Orphism, since he has argued that the *Sacred Discourse in 24 Rhapsodies* consisted of a collection of shorter poems that was divided into twenty-four books, rather than “one complex theogonical poem that combines the length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*,” as Graf and Johnston have recently suggested.⁵⁴ Comparing the Rhapsodies to the *Sibylline Oracles*, Edmonds argues that “the

53. Lévi-Strauss 1966: 35.

54. Graf and Johnston 2013: 188–189.

Rhapsodies were more likely a loose collection of Orphic poetry, containing a variety of poems [of varying lengths] that had been composed and reworked over the centuries by a number of different *bricoleurs*.”⁵⁵ He views the existence of a collection of shorter narratives as the solution to many of the contradictions that have puzzled scholars as they attempt to reconstruct one coherent narrative. Edmonds suggests that “rather than trying to trace a stemma [as West has done] ... we may imagine that, at least until it was collected in the Rhapsodies, different works of Orpheus circulated in widely varying versions, with new additions and transformations made freely by each generation of pseudepigraphers,” in which case differing versions are simply reflections of different narratives within the collection, and not internally contradictory.⁵⁶ Edmonds presents an argument worthy of consideration, but he does not provide a detailed analysis of the Rhapsodies that reconstructs them as this collection of shorter poems. Therefore, part of the purpose of this book is to provide exactly that sort of analysis, not just of the Rhapsodies, but of the entire tradition of Orphic theogonies.

As we will see in chapter 2, the Derveni poem was a short theogonic poem that functioned as a hymn to Zeus. In chapter 3, I argue that the scattered references to Orphic poetry in authors from the Classical Period probably come from different Orphic texts in different collections, rather than from one poem called the Eudemian theogony. Although the Hieronyman theogony presents us with a detailed, coherent narrative, in chapter 4 I consider the possibility that this narrative might not have extended beyond Phanes, and that other events in our sources for the Hieronyman theogony might have come from other Orphic texts. In chapter 5, I study evidence that might confirm Edmonds’ hypothesis that the Rhapsodies were a collection of shorter poems and not a continuous narrative, but nevertheless I conclude that it is quite possible that one of these twenty-four poems consisted of a six-generation succession myth, perhaps comparable in length to Hesiod. In chapter 6, I read the myth of Dionysus Zagreus in a way that sets aside modern assumptions about this story’s supposed doctrinal significance and sees it in the context of the Rhapsodic narrative as a whole.

Reading the Orphic tradition of theogonic poetry as a loose collection of short theogonic hymns, rather than as a tight stemma of lengthy theogonic narratives, has two consequences for how we view the relationship between these texts and the Orphic rituals with which they were supposedly associated. On the one hand, as Edmonds suggests, “the relation of these texts to the rituals founded by Orpheus must be more complex than has been previously assumed,”⁵⁷ since a loose collection of short texts can be applied to a

55. Edmonds 2013: 149.

56. Edmonds 2013: 159.

57. Edmonds 2013: 157.

wide variety of purposes and settings. But on the other hand, as I would argue, if Orphic theogonic material appeared mostly in the form of shorter poems, then, despite the fact that the specific performance context remains obscure, at least it is easier to imagine their performance as short hymns than as one continuous epic narrative. We may never know specifically what rituals involved the use of these texts, but if we accept that generally the texts consisted of brief hymns with theogonic content, then at least it is conceivable that, in general, the texts had a place in Orphic ritual performance. As their structure tends to differ from Hesiod's *Theogony*, so the context of their performance might have been quite different.

Ancient Theogonic Traditions

Despite these possible structural differences, many of the elements and themes of Orphic theogonies are similar to Hesiod—notably, the core succession myth—and where they are different, these differences are often regarded as alternatives, or deviations, from the more “mainstream” tradition of Hesiod.⁵⁸ However, taking into consideration the wider set of more ancient theogonic traditions from India, the Near East, and the Mediterranean region, it becomes apparent that Hesiod is also a bricoleur who weaves eastern motifs into his own unique narrative. Likewise, Orphic poets were bricoleurs who chose elements from outside Greek tradition to combine with traditionally Greek elements, in ways that were different from Hesiod. The narratives of Hesiod and the Orphic poets were products of Greek creativity, but the way the authors assimilated eastern elements into their narratives yielded different results.

When the Hurrian-Hittite *Song of Kumarbi* (sometimes referred to as the “Kingship in Heaven” myth) preserved on Hittite tablets was first published in 1946, scholars quickly recognized significant parallels between this myth and Hesiod.⁵⁹ More recently, Burkert and West have pointed out many other parallel elements between Greek and Near Eastern myths, which must have come to Greece during the Late Bronze Age and Early Archaic Period. Burkert argued that these parallels were not few and far between, but detectable in every level of Greek society from the eighth to sixth centuries BC, a period he called the “orientalizing revolution.”⁶⁰ West supplied more details by pointing out parallels between Near Eastern literature and Greek literature from Homer to Aeschylus. He argued that “West Asiatic” literature influenced Greek literature, and that this was not “a marginal phenomenon,” but “pervasive at many

58. West 1997a: 276; López-Ruiz 2010: 130–136.

59. Barnett 1945; Burkert 2004: 3 = 2009: 10–11.

60. Burkert 1992: 128–129.

levels and at most times.”⁶¹ Of particular importance here are the parallels between Hesiod’s succession myth and the Hurrian-Hittite succession myth, as well as the Babylonian creation myth *Enûma Eliš*. Although West’s method consists simply of “the selection and juxtaposition of parallels,” he does not suggest that these earlier texts are “direct sources of the Greek text.”⁶² The most recent extant copies of the *Enûma Eliš* were written on cuneiform tablets centuries before Hesiod, and it is unlikely that Hesiod would have had a copy of the text or a working knowledge of cuneiform. Therefore, West leaves open the question of the mode of transmission.⁶³ Burkert initially answers this question by finding evidence for migrant craftsmen in technologies ranging from pottery to divination. From the ninth to sixth centuries BC, craftsmen from the Near East migrated to Greece in increasing numbers. Their prolonged stay at Greek cities allowed closer involvement than trade, which made it possible for Greek artisans to appropriate certain skills, an important example of which was alphabetic writing.⁶⁴

López-Ruiz focuses the discussion specifically on the west Asian Semitic groups that were most closely connected to Archaic Greece in space and time. Much of the literature of the Phoenicians is lost because they used perishable writing materials, but some literary parallels can be found between Greek literature and Semitic texts, such as the Ugaritic deity lists, the cycle of Baal myths, and the Hebrew Bible. López-Ruiz draws on these to argue that Near Eastern influence can best be explained through more intimate contacts than trade and skilled artisans: “mainly oral and intimate transmission of stories and beliefs not *from* ‘foreigners’ *to* ‘Greeks’ ... but between mothers and sons, nannies and children,” and other domestic relationships.⁶⁵ To the son of a Greek father and a Phoenician mother, Phoenician myths would not be seen as foreign; and over the course of a few generations, these myths would become a part of the same tradition, along with Greek myths told within the same family or community. The modes of transmission or influence of mythological themes and motifs were multiple, many-layered, and multi-directional, from the most distant trade networks to the most intimate domestic relationships, and from the most advanced literary activity to the simplest stories told to children.

Lane Fox brings the discussion to a greater level of precision (but a more limited scope) by tracing the settlement patterns of Euboeans in the eighth century BC from Cilicia, Syria, and Cyprus in the east to Sicily and Ischia in the west. Lane Fox argues that these Euboeans already had a succession myth, but when they encountered neo-Hittite culture they recognized similarities and

61. West 1997a: 59.

62. West 1997a: viii.

63. West 1997a: 586–629.

64. Burkert 1992: 21–25, 41.

65. López-Ruiz 2010: 5.

assimilated particular details, such as the sickle with which Kronos castrates Ouranos and the battle of Zeus against Typhon. They associated features of the landscapes they encountered with episodes in their myths, leading Lane Fox to reject the idea of transmission of parallels and to see these similarities as the products of “creative misunderstanding.” Rather than simply adopting the myths of other cultures, they recognized a “fortuitous convergence” and “amplified their existing stories” by assimilating new features. Lane Fox suggests that the creative activity of these Euboeans, though unknown to Homer, functioned as Hesiod’s source for these episodes of the *Theogony*.⁶⁶ The Euboeans of the eighth century were bricoleurs no less than Hesiod and the Orphics, so in the Orphic theogonies we see a different configuration of some of these same elements (e.g., the acts of castration and swallowing, serpentine deities). Where Orphic theogonies appear to be influenced by eastern myth, they assimilate particular details into the Greek succession myth in a manner similar to the Euboeans whom Lane Fox describes. In terms of the core succession myth, they never change the pattern of action but they amplify it with elements of eastern myth through the process of bricolage.

According to Burkert, the mode of transmission most relevant to the study of Orphic material was the influence of migrant craftsmen whose *technai* were divination and healing, both of which required expertise in purification techniques. Burkert demonstrated that specialists in divination, healing, and purification were quite mobile in the Near East, and many of them were migrating to Greece by the sixth century BC.⁶⁷ These specialists usually had an extensive knowledge of myth, accompanied by texts that they used in ritual. Conspicuous among them were the magi, Persian priests with whom the Greeks had extensive contact by the fifth century. When using the word μάγοι to refer to these Persian priests, Greek authors showed great respect for this ancient mystical practice; but sometimes when referring to fellow Greeks as μάγοι, they used the word pejoratively, characterizing them as itinerant magicians who profited shamefully from their art. For example, the Hippocratic text *On the Sacred Disease* puts μάγοι in the same category as “purifiers, beggars, and quacks.”⁶⁸ Plato describes a similar class of priest in his *Republic*, the “begging priests and fortune-tellers” who perform ritual services for a fee, using “a bunch of books by Musaeus and Orpheus” (2.364b–365a). Burkert has labeled this class of priests *orpheotelestai*: they were independent agents who performed divination, purification, and initiation for a price, using texts ascribed to Orpheus. Most likely these were the ritual specialists who used Orphic theogonies, having been influenced by other practitioners from the east, not least of whom were

66. Lane Fox 2008: 83, 265, 317–349.

67. Burkert 1992: 41–87.

68. Hippocrates, *De Morbo Sacro* 1.23–24; cf. Burkert 2004: 107–108; Edmonds 2008: 16–39.

the magi.⁶⁹ Some connection between the *orpheotelestai* and the magi can perhaps be seen in the Derveni author's statement that "initiates make a preliminary sacrifice to the Eumenides in the same way the magi do" (DP 6.8–9). This suggests two premises that are relevant to the study of Orphic theogonies: (1) ritual specialists such as the magi and the *orpheotelestai* were at least partly responsible for the transmission of mythical motifs from the east to Greece; and (2) the use of theogonic texts by ritual specialists was itself a practice that was transmitted from the east.

By whatever means the themes and motifs of Near Eastern myth made their way into Greek myth, the fact that similarities exist is well-established, particularly in the case of Hesiod's *Theogony*. Scholars have pointed out many parallels between Hesiod and earlier theogonies, but some of these have also been found in Orphic theogonies. And in passages where Orphic theogonies diverge from the narrative of Hesiod's *Theogony*, these differences tend to find parallels with Near Eastern themes and motifs that do not appear in Hesiod. In other words, Orphic bricoleurs assimilated elements of eastern myths into their narratives in ways that were different from Hesiod. For example, in the Hurrian-Hittite succession myth, the sky-god An is defeated when his son Kumarbi bites off his genitals and swallows them, thus becoming pregnant with the next king in the succession myth, the storm-god Tessub.⁷⁰ The parallels between this and Hesiod are obvious: like Kumarbi, Kronos castrates his father, the sky-god Ouranos, and he also swallows his children.⁷¹ Depending on how we read the Derveni poem, it follows the same basic three-generation succession myth, but adds a detail that is absent from Hesiod: after the reign of Kronos, "who did a great deed" (OF 10.1 B)—presumably castrating his father—Zeus swallows either the whole body of Phanes or the phallus of Ouranos (OF 8, 12.1 B).⁷² This narrative includes an event that does not appear in Hesiod—Ouranos is castrated in Hesiod but no one swallows his phallus—yet this episode in the Derveni poem is comparable to the Hurrian-Hittite myth, in which Kumarbi swallows An's genitals. Where a difference from Hesiod appears in the text, closer inspection might reveal a connection with Hurrian-Hittite myth. This suggests that it might not be a deviation from the mainstream, but a competing version of the myth that assimilated eastern motifs in different ways. Other parallels have been noticed between Orphic and Near Eastern theogonies, and these will be discussed in detail as they become relevant in later chapters. Therefore, in order to lay a foundation for the discussion of those parallels, the next few pages contain a brief summary of earlier Near Eastern theogonies

69. Burkert 1982: 1–22; cf. Obbink 1997: 47; KPT 2006: 235; Parker 2011: 16–20.

70. *Song of Kumarbi* 4–10, trans. Hoffner and Beckman 1998: 42–43.

71. Hesiod, *Theogony* 178–182, 460–464; see West 1966: 20–23; 1997a: 278–280; Lane Fox 2008: 259–279.

72. See chapter 2 for more on this.