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AFTER CONSTANTINE

STORIES FROM THE LATE ANTIQUE AND
EARLY BYZANTINE ERA



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EARLY BYZANTINE ERA

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[1] Στα λόγια μου ας είναι
μάρτυρες όλοι οι παντοτινοί.

[2] Ότι λευκός ήταν ο κόσμος
ώσπου ν' ακουστεί η φωνή του
βασιλιά Τελεστή
όταν διέταξε: ας γίνει!

[3] Και όλα τα ουράνια
σώματα ενώθηκαν και
σχημάτισαν μεγάλη σφραγίδα
όμοια με σφυρί και άστραψε ο
ουρανός και στροβιλίστηκαν
τα νέφη.

[...]

[7] Κι έπαψε να 'ναι διάφανος
ο κόσμος και φανερώθηκε.

[8] Και είδε ο Ταξιδευτής και
θαύμασε και θέλησε ν' αφήσει
και να πάρει.

[...]

[11] Και για πάντα συνέχισε
την θεϊκή του πορεία, νέα
μονοπάτια ανοίγοντας.

THE SCENE OF ORPHEUS TAMING WILD ANIMALS

ORPHEUS AND THE CENTAUR CHIRON

VANYA LOZANOVA-STANCHEVA¹

Abstract

A series of remarkable images on mosaics from sepulchral buildings or ritual halls, textile works of art within a Christian context, as well as *pyxides*, introduce strange and unusual mythological figures into the widespread theme of Orpheus *taming* wild animals. A special place in the pictorial composition is occupied by the figure of a centaur, who seems to have had complex functions indicating the space of the events.

This paper aims to systematise the source base, to analyse “the narrative,” and to offer new details to the interpretation of the remarkable and enigmatic scene, which –in combination with the fragmented poetic evidence– allows the reconstruction of a possible mythological precedent for the journey of Orpheus to the World Beyond, where he attained the mystic theological knowledge and that allowed him to lay the foundations of the mystical initiations. Those eschatological notions were projected in some early Christian or Christian gnostic communities in the period between the 2nd and the mid-6th century, as indicated by sacral and funerary monuments.

Keywords: *Orpheus, Chiron, centaurus, the World Beyond, the scene of Orpheus Taming Wild Animals*

A series of remarkable images on mosaics from sepulchral buildings or ritual halls, textile works of art (originating predominantly from Egypt) –possibly from *medallions* decorating funerary textiles, as well as *pyxides*, introduce strange and unusual mythological figures into the widespread theme of *Orpheus taming wild*

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animals, e.g., centaurs, Pan, and satyrs marking the Dionysian mythological circle and a Dionysian religious *connotation*. Thus, a centaur and Pan with a *syrinx* are seen in the lowermost row of the composition of the floor mosaic from Jerusalem,² found in a building identified as a Christian tomb.

Figure 1

[A textile from Egypt]. Collection of the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection. Washington, DC.
<https://www.doaks.org/resources/textiles/catalogue/BZ.1972.4>

The parallels of that image in several works of textile art³ testify that we are not faced with a local exception in the interpretation of the theme. Some of these works are:

1. A textile from Egypt in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks;⁴
2. An Egyptian textile in Moscow (private collection), later – in the Pushkin Museum, now – with unknown provenance: Pan in the upper right-hand quadrant, looking inward and holding a *syrinx* in his hand;
3. An Egyptian textile at Victoria and Albert Museum, London, originating from a cemetery at Akhmim, Egypt; the figure of Pan with a *syrinx* in his hand is placed between Orpheus and the right-hand frame of the artefact;

² Strzygowski, Dashian 1901, p. 139–171, Pl. 4; LIMC 7.2: Orpheus 171; see Bliss 1901; currently in Turkey.

³ Madigan 1992, pp.405–416; the parallels were proposed for the first time by Strzygowski, Dashian 1901, pp.139–171.

⁴ Madigan 1992, p. 405–416, Plate 1.

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4. An Egyptian textile in New York (private collection): Orpheus among the animals, flanked by a pair of satyrs.⁵

To the artefacts described, it is possible to add a fragmentary relief pediment from the Egyptian town of Malawi, which is assumed to have originated from a tomb structure that preserves not Orpheus but his lyre, a selection of animals and a Pan.



Figure 2

Orpheus Taming Wild Animals [ivory pyxis]. Monastery of St. Columbano at Bobbio.

http://www.tuttopiaccenza.net/notizie_utili_e_approfondimenti/alta_val_trebbia/museo_dell'E2%80%99abbazia_di_san_columbano_sc_3291.htm

The elaborate composition of the ivory pyxis from the monastery of St. Columbano at Bobbio, published by Joseph Natanson,⁶ is complemented by the figures of a centaur and Pan among the animals, whereas the *pyxis* from the Abbey of St. Julien à Broude, today in the Bargello Museum in Florence,⁷ is decorated with two centaurs accompanied by a pair of Sileni. Both artefacts are dated to the 5th–6th century and their origin is attributed to Alexandria.⁸

The Funerary Context

Many researchers believe erroneously that centaurs had no

funerary associations,⁹ that they were not among the usual monsters of the Underworld,¹⁰

⁵ Walters Art Gallery 1947, No. 806.

⁶ Natanson 1953; Volbach 1976, p. 70, No. 91.

⁷ Graeven 1899.

⁸ Friedman 1967, pp. 1–13.

⁹ Friedman 1970, p. 223.

¹⁰ Austin 1986, pp. 121–122; Adkin 2006, pp. 173–175.

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and that they were not linked to figures in the Dionysian circle as, for example, Pan. However, mythology is well familiar with the twelve demons, Lamian Centaurs or Lamian Pheres, which Zeus placed as guards of the child Dionysus against the scheming of the jealous Hera. Her revenge was to transform them into ox-horned centaurs. They accompanied Dionysus in his Indian campaign. During the Antiquity, centaurs were often depicted in the deity's *thiasos*, sometimes even pulling his chariot.¹¹ According to some ancient authors, Dionysus himself was entrusted to be brought up and educated by the wise centaur Chiron,¹² considered by Homer (*Il.* 11.832) to be “the wisest and justest of all the centaurs.”

The Dionysian context was not alien to Orphism and its mythology. Orpheus is credited with the Orphic reform in the Dionysian cult. The mythological versions are inconsistent in revealing their relations. Ancient poetry places centaurs as guards along the road to the Underworld, together with Scylla, Hydra, Chimaera, Gorgons and Harpies.¹³

In the famous scene at the entrance to the Underworld, Virgil¹⁴ included the centaurs first among the monsters guarding it:

*Multa que praetere avariarum monstra ferarum
Centauri inforibus stabulant, Scyllae quebi formes,
et centum geminus Briareus, ac belua Lernaee
horrendum stridens, flammis que armata Chimaera,
Gorgones Harpyiae que et formatri corporis umbrae.*

Many researchers assume that Virgil was influenced in his notions by *De Rerum Natura* (4.732) of Lucretius (99–55BC), where centaurs ranked first, ahead of Scylla and Cerberus, among the monsters welcoming the dead.

¹¹ Nonn, *Dionys*, 14. 143 ff. 247 ff.

¹² Ptolem, Hephæstionis. *Nova Historia*, 4.

¹³ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6. 286–287; Statius, *Thebaid*, 4. 536 ff.; Statius, *Silvae*, 5.3. 260 ff.; Silius Italic, 13, 587–590.

¹⁴ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6, 282–290.

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The figures of the centaur and Pan/Sileni are marked by a liminal status and unambiguously identify the split between the two natures: human and inhuman, civilised space and wild Nature, emphasized by the mountains covered with forests and caves. Both figures combine wild and animal characteristics with lust, lawlessness and lack of moderation (for example in wine drinking and sex).¹⁵ Even in Homer (*Il.* 1.268; 2.742; see *Odyssey.* 21.300) centaurs are “wild creatures” (*Φῆρες*) inhabiting Mount Pelion. Strabo also calls them “wild creatures” (Strabo. 9.5.19), and according to a fragment by Theognis, centaurs even ate raw meat (Theogn. Frg. 541)! When Heracles sought the Erymanthian Boar for his fourth labour, he reached the cave of the wise centaur Pholus, who invited him and offered him food. The centaur prepared roast meat for his guest and placed raw meat for himself on the table (Schol. Theocrit. *Idyll.* 7. 149). The descriptions by the ancient authors of the episode with the upbringing of the young Achilles by Chiron vary only



Fig 3

[Dish with Orpheus among the animals]. Römisch-Germanisches Museum. Köln
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dish_with_Orpheus_among_the_animals,_Romisch-Germanisches_Museum,_Cologne_\(8119434657\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dish_with_Orpheus_among_the_animals,_Romisch-Germanisches_Museum,_Cologne_(8119434657).jpg)

concerning the raw food with which the centaur fed him: according to Apollodorus (3.13.6) –on the inwards of lions and the marrows of boars and bears; according to the scholion to Homer’s *Iliad* (15. 37) on the marrows of lions and bears; and according to Statius (*Achill.* 2.99 ff.)– on lion’s flesh and she-wolf’s marrow.¹⁶ Such characteristics burden the centaur’s mythological figure with a marginal and liminal nature, marking the borders between the two worlds: human and beyond human.

¹⁵ Diod., Sic., 4. 69. 4; Apoll., El. 21; Ovid., *Met.* 12.210.

¹⁶ Robertson 1940, pp. 177–180.

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Consequently, the centaur's image in combination with Pan/Silenus in the scene of Orpheus with the wild animals builds harmoniously not only the Dionysian context; it also adds funerary aspects to the analysed composition. The appearance of these images in the scene *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* does not contradict in the least, but –conversely– confirms the hypothesis about reflection from a sacral transient *topos* at the border with the World Beyond, which would explain the artist's choice to depict them in funerary buildings and ritual spaces.

Fantastic Mythological Figures

The analyses omit the circumstance that in addition to Dionysian figures, the varying compositions of the theme among the animals are intertwined with other mythological creatures indicating the World Beyond and its deforming discourse. First and foremost, the appearance of a *griffin* in the top right-hand corner of the mosaic from Shahba, Syria (FK117) is very impressive.

The *griffin* is also presented in the elaborate composition of animals and mythological figures in relief on the inner side of a dish with the scene of Orpheus among the animals (Köln, Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Inv. No. 166), dated to the 3rd century BCE and found in a funerary context. It is placed on the second row from top to bottom, looking outward and with back turned to the elephant following him, while a centaur playing a double *aulos* is depicted on the next, third line.

The presence of a bird like a peacock, charged with paradisiac connotations, is much more frequently depicted in the scene: again, in the mosaic from Shahba, Syria, the peacock is depicted symmetrically to the *griffin*, immediately above the head of Orpheus, on the left. A similar polyvalent motif can be seen in the mosaic of the Villa with the *Orpheus Mosaic* in Leptis Magna (National Museum, Tripoli), where the peacock is



Fig.4
Blanzly-lès-Fismes [mosaic]. Musée d'art et d'archéologie du Pays de Laon, France,
(first half of the 4th century, found in 1858).
<http://www.genealexis.fr/cartes-postales/blanzly.php>

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depicted on the right, above the singer's head; the mosaic from the Woodchester Roman Villa (Gloucestershire, England), where the peacock appears on the left, immediately next to the figure of Orpheus; the mosaic from the ancient Roman city of Volubilis, Morocco. The image of the peacock on the mosaic from Blanzky-lès-Fismes (at the Musée d'art et d'archéologie du Pays de Laon, France), on the left, above the singer's head, is extremely impressive.¹⁷ It occupies an important place also on the top row, to the right of Orpheus, on the inner relief of the dish with Orpheus among the animals, Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Köln. The examples can be multiplied.

The peacock was a significant figure in the images presenting the Source of Life in the World Beyond. These compositions often include many animals amidst landscapes and floral motifs, especially vine twigs, which can be seen in several floor mosaics, e.g., the fragments of floor mosaics from Syria (Emessa?), today at the J. Paul Getty Museum (donated in 1975). Vine twigs usually frame peacocks positioned frontally on both sides of a *kantharos* as a symbol of the Source of Life. Those images became subsequently prominent in early Church visual art. In early Christian art and literature peacocks were considered to be the most delightful creatures on Earth and St. Augustine mentions the conviction that their flesh is incorruptible (Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 21.4). The peacock, which is very often integrated in the thematic composition of Orpheus among the animals, also indicates the World Beyond and is closely associated with the notion of Paradise on Earth and the Gardens of Eden at the end of the world. From the 6th century onwards, the peacock became a stable Christian symbol of immortality, associated with Paradise and the Way Beyond, which also imposed it as an important decorative element in sepulchral constructions, on sarcophagi and floor mosaics.¹⁸

The Literary Narrative

The narrative introducing the mythological motif of the Nature-enchanting power of Orpheus' music and song is extremely scarce and severely fragmented. More often, it is taken out of its context, to propose additional associative interpretations to the principal

¹⁷ Stern 1955, pp.41–77.

¹⁸ Maguire 1987, pp. 39–40.

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theme; such are the allusions in Old-Attic tragedy and poetry.¹⁹ Visualisation in pictorial art seems to precede the appearance of the theme in verbal art. However, a concrete literary narrative can be reconstructed, thus verbalising and rendering concrete the relation of the pictorial theme with Orpheus and the Nature enchanted by him, on the one hand, and the figure of the centaur in the group of works of art outlined above –on the other.

One of the earliest poetic pieces of evidence –frg. 62 by Simonides of Ceos (second half of the 6th century, first half of the 5th century BCE)– indisputably places the analysed motif in the context of the mysterious journey of the Argonauts:

*Above his [Orpheus'] head innumerable birds flitted, and fish leapt
straight out of the dark blue water at his beautiful song.²⁰*

A similar motif also appears in the *Argonautica* (l. 572–574) of Apollonius Rhodius (3rd century BCE); the son of Oeagrus played a well-composed song on his lyre, and fishes darted above the deep sea:

*τοὶ δὲ βαθεῖης ἰχθύες αἰσسونτες ὑπερῶν ἄλός, ἄμμιγα παύροις ἄπλετοι, ὕγρὰ κέλευθα
διασκαίροντες ἔποντο.*

The earliest image of Orpheus on the metope from Delphi known to us, dated to the 7th century BCE,²¹ also presents him in the context of the journey of the Argonauts. This motif is developed in its most detailed, albeit latest variant in the so-called *Ὀρφείως Ἀργοναυτικά* (Orphic Argonautica), an epic poem of 1.376 verses in hexameter, dated not earlier than the 4th–5th and even 6th century. The narrative is in the first person singular, on behalf of Orpheus. After the early Christian writer Tatian (ca. 120–173 CE),²² many researchers are inclined to consider Onomacritus (ca. 530–480 BCE) as the author of the

¹⁹ Aesch. *Ag.* 1629–1631; Eurip. *Iph. Aul.* 1211–1214; Eurip. *Bacch.* 560–564.

²⁰ Simonides, fragment 62 (PMG, 567), Orph. 943 Bernabé: Available at [https://livingpoets.dur.ac.uk/w/Simonides_fragment_62_\(PMG_567_Page\)](https://livingpoets.dur.ac.uk/w/Simonides_fragment_62_(PMG_567_Page)) [Last access 7 February 2021. The page is no longer available].

²¹ Szeliga 1986, pp. 297–305.

²² Tatian. *Adv. Graecos.* 1. 41; King 1867, pp. 6–7.

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poem, who –according to him – created all works disseminated under the name of Orpheus.²³ That opinion was followed both by several ancient authors and by modern researchers. Some of them are more cautious, assuming that the authorship of the poem belonged to some unknown author, not later than Onomacritus. However, the analysis of the verses and their structure allows their dating to many later times, not preceding at least the era of Apollonius Rhodius.²⁴ Writing during the Late Antiquity, the author under the name of “Orpheus” was in a position to integrate or at least to know the entire tradition preceding him, following to a great extent the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius (3rd century BCE). However, the *Orphic Argonautica* differs both in very important details and in the simplicity of the narrative, compared to that of Apollonius.

According to the *Orphic Argonautica*, when Jason started recruiting his crew of kings and heroes, he first sought Orpheus in Pieria, at the highest peaks of Leibethra, while he skilfully played his guitar and sang sweet songs in his cave:

*he found me (Orpheus – author’s note, V.L.-S.) occupied playing my cithara skilfully and singing sweet songs, stroking wild animals and winged serpents (71–73).*²⁵

This vision unambiguously identifies the conquering power of Orpheus’ music and song over the wild animals. Jason convinced the Thracian to join the Argonauts, because only he could guide them in the sea, i.e., as a guide, and also a priest,²⁶ and the other heroes did not wish to set off without him.²⁷ And not only that! Here, the anonymous poet has introduced a clear hint at an earlier *catabasis* or journey to the world of the dead from which the singer from *horse-breeding Thrace* managed to return. Jason’s choice to look

²³ Kinkel 1877, fr. 8, p. 241.

²⁴ Bode 1825, pp. 388–397.

²⁵ Ἀλλ’ ὅτε δὴ συνάγειρεν ἀγακλειτοῦς βασιλῆας, θρήκην εἰς εὐπωλον ἐπέιγετο δῖος Ἰήσων, καί μ’ ἔκιχεν κιθάρην πολυδαίδαλον ἐντύνοντα, ὄφρα κέσοι μέλπων προχέω μελίγηρυν ἀοιδὴν, κηλήσω δέ τεθῆρας ἰδ’ ἔρπετὰ καὶ πετεηνά. Gesner 1764, p. 20.

²⁶ [...] Οὐ γὰρ δὴ πλώσαι πρὸς βάρβαρα φῦλα μέδονται, νόσφισ ἔθεν· καὶ γὰρ ῥα ποτιζ ὄφον ἠερόεντα, νεῖα τον εἰς κευθμῶνα, λιτῆς εἰς πυθμένα γαίης, μὸν ὄν ἀπ’ ἀνθρώπων πελάσαι καὶ νόστον ἀνευρεῖν· ὧν ἔνεκεν ξυνήν τε δύνη Μινύαισιν ἀρέσθαι, καὶ κλέος ἀνθρώποισιν ἐπ’ ἔσσομένο ἰσιπυθέσθαι. Val. Flacc. *Arg.* 186–187.

²⁷ *OA* 77–95.

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for him first, before the other heroes, was because he was the only one among the mortals who dared to travel to the dark fog, down into the depths of Hades, and the only mortal who found the way back.²⁸

According to Herodorus of Heraclea Pontica,²⁹ who compiled an *Argonautica* around 400 BCE, and Apollonius Rhodius (*Arg.* 1. 33), it was precisely the centaur Chiron who advised Jason to take Orpheus with him, because only the Thracian singer was capable of guiding the ship *Argo* safely past the Sirens as incarnation of death³⁰ and marking the transition Beyond. The sound of their murderous voices was to be drowned by the music of Orpheus' lyre and song. Chiron was a soothsayer even in Pindar's poetry.³¹ He was not only endowed with prophetic skills, but he passed them to his disciples as well.³² Herodorus unambiguously referred to Chiron as *μάντις* (oracle):

*Ἡρόδωρος δύο εἶναι Ὀρφεῖς φησιν· ὧν τὸν ἕτερον συμπεπλευκέναι τοῖς
Ἀργοναύταις. Ζητεῖται δὲ διὰ τὴν Ὀρφεύς ἀσθενῆς ὧν συνέπλει τοῖς ἥρωσιν· ὅτι
μάντις ὧν ὁ Χείρων ἔχρησε μὴ δύνασθαι τὰς Σειρήνας παρελθεῖν αὐτοῦς
Ὀρφέως μὴ συμπλέοντος. Οὕτως Ἡρόδωρος.*

Apollonius also ranks Orpheus first (1.23) in the so-called Catalogue of Argonauts (1. 23–233). According to him, he was the son of Calliope and the Thracian Oeagrus, born near the Pimpleian Height. That was Orpheus then, invited by Jason to take part in his endeavour, on the advice of the wise centaur Chiron (1. 33). Orpheus was the ruler of Bistonian Pieria, whereas in *Orphic Argonautica* of the Cicones in cattle-rich Bistonia, or –more generally– in Thracia (1. 23–34): *Men say that he by the music of his songs charmed the stubborn rocks upon the mountains and the course of rivers. And the wild oak-trees to this day, tokens of that magic strain, that grow at Zone on the Thracian shore, stand in ordered ranks close together, the same which under the charm of his lyre he led down from*

²⁸ *Ibid* 90–95.

²⁹ 31 F, 43 J; see Schol. Apoll. Rhod. 1. 31; FGtH 2 Müller Fr. 39, p. 38.

³⁰ Apoll. Rhod. *Arg.* 4. 891–919.

³¹ Pindar. *Pyth. Odes* 9.59–65.

³² Apollon. Rhod., *Arg.* 2.508–512.

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*Pieria. Such then was Orpheus whom Aeson's son welcomed to share his toils, in obedience to the behest of Cheiron, Orpheus ruler of Bistonian Pieria.*³³ In late authors like Pomponius Mela³⁴ and Nicander³⁵ the scene is reduced to a profane pastoral situation, placed in an ostensibly real geographic landscape, near the city Zone on the Thracian coast, probably under the influence of Apollonius Rhodius (1. 23–34).³⁶

We probably owe that desacralisation to the early mythographers, who made their geographic localisation relevant to the location of the cave of the centaur Chiron. The ship of the Argonauts first passed by it before setting off on its long and dangerous journey (see below §4. *In the Cave of the Centaur Chiron*).

Jason's motive to choose Orpheus first as his travel companion in his journey for the Golden Fleece appears to stem from a mythological precedent attributing both magic capacities and experience in the journey far Beyond to the Thracian musician. One of Orpheus's functions on the ship *Argo*, in addition to his magic ability to pacify the sea waves, the forces of Nature and the Sirens with his music (there are many references to the magic power of his singing and music during the campaign!) was his priestly role and the performing of rites for the participants in the journey. He was primarily connected with the sacred acts of the heroes, the communication with the divine and the restoring of order.³⁷ He made decisions on the place, time and nature of the rites to be performed by the Argonauts to secure the safety of their perilous journey. These functions can be reconstructed with particular clarity in *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius. The combination of sacrificial offering (402–449), ritual feast (450–459) and Orpheus' song (496–515), where the singer's priestly figure is indisputably presented as central and

³³ Apollon. Rhod. 1. 26–31.

³⁴ Pomp. Mela 2. 2. 16–33.

³⁵ Nicandr. *Ther.* 458–482.

³⁶ *πρῶτά νυν Ὀρφεὺς μνησώμεθα, τὸν ῥά ποτ' αὐτῆ, Καλλιόπη Θρηϊκὴ φατίζεται εὐνηθεῖσα, Οἱ ἀγρωσκοπιῆς Πιμπληίδος ἄγχι τεκέσθαι, αὐτὰρ τὸν γ' ἐνέπουσιν ἀτειρέας οὖρεσι πέτρας, θέλξει ἀοιδῶν ἐνοπιῆ ποταμῶν τε ῥέεθρα. φηγοῖδ' ἀγριάδες, κείνης ἔτι σήματα μολπῆς, ἀκτῆς Θρηϊκῆς Ζώνης ἔπι τηλεθόσσαι, ἐξείης στιχόωσιν ἐπήτριμοι, ἃς ὄγ' ἐπι πρὸ, θελγομένας φόρμιγγι κατήγαγε Πιερίηθεν. Ὀρφέα μὲν δὴ τοῖον ἔδῶν ἐπαρωγὸν ἀέθλων, Αἰσονίδης Χείρωνος ἐφημοσύνη σπιθήσας δέξατο, Πιερίη Βιστωνίδι κοιρανέοντα.*

³⁷ Apollon. Rhod. 1. 492–515; see Busch 1993, pp. 305–318; Karanika 2010, p. 395 with literature.

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decisive for overcoming critical moments and for restoring the unity (*ὁμόνοια*), are of key importance for the successful start of the Argonauts' journey. The episode in which Orpheus initiates the Samothracian mysteries on the Island of *Samothrace* (1.915–921), which was needed for the safe continuation of the journey, is remarkable, albeit laconically. Diodorus Siculus (4. 43. 1) adds that when a violent storm caught up with the Argonauts and all lost hope of salvation, Orpheus – who was the only one onboard the ship who had been initiated in the Mysteries of the Samothracian gods – addressed a prayer to them for the saving of the heroes.

In Phrygia, Orpheus instructed the Argonauts how to dance fully armed, hitting their shields with their swords, during the sacrificial offering to Rhea to pacify her after they had killed King Cyzicus by mistake (1. 1132–1141).

Under the influence of the ritual acts described in detail, *the gracious god dessinclined her heart to pious sacrifices; and favourable signs appeared. The trees shed abundant fruit, and round their feet the earth of its own accord put forth flowers from the tender grass. And the beasts of the wild wood left their lairs and thicket sand came up fawning on them with their tails. And she caused yet another marvel; for hither to there was no flow of water on Dindymum, but then for them an unceasing stream gushed forth from the thirsty peak just as it was, and the dwellers around in after times called that stream, the spring of Jason.*³⁸ The magic landscape could betray a reflection of the mythological motif of the power of Orpheus' music and song.

The singer from *horse-breeding Thrace* revealed to the Argonauts the meaning of Apollo's majestic epiphany on the desert island of Thynias (2. 683–693), advising them to dedicate it to the deity, to build him an altar on the shore and to pacify him with the steam of sacrifice and libations, so that he would secure their safe return. Again, for a safe return, Orpheus instructed the Argonauts to dedicate Apollo's tripod to the local deities (4. 1547–1555). That stable thematic line in *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius outlines the mystic silhouette of a powerful mediator between the heroes in the journey of the ship *Argo*, on the one hand, and the world of gods and demons –on the other.

³⁸ Transl. by R. C. Seaton 1967.

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Orpheus' decisive participation in Medea's magic rituals with which she lulled to sleep the dragon and the queen of the Underworld in order to give a chance to Jason to take the Golden Fleece is even more impressive.³⁹

The ritual character of the journey of the Argonauts is well outlined and emphasised, which made the presence of the figure of the priest-mystagogue and *μάντις* (soothsayer) Orpheus extremely important for the safe journey far to the East, to the palaces of the Sun's son, because the journey of the Argonauts essentially encodes the idea of the journey to the World Beyond, beyond the world of mortals. "The presence of Orpheus on the ship *Argo* represents an alternative epic variant that seems extremely important and decisively original compared to the standard concept of the heroic figures of the epic poets."⁴⁰ Researchers note the alternative nature of the figure of Orpheus, who was the only one to be the son of the mortal Oeagrus, the other heroes being sons of gods. Pindar's Fourth Pythian Ode characterises them specifically as *ἡμιθέοι* (demigods: verses 184, 211, cf. 12).

Already back in the early 20th century, Marike Van der Kolf (1923) proposed the hypothesis of the ritual character of the journey of the Argonauts Beyond, based on the analysis of Pindar's Fourth Pythian Ode (vv. 157–165), composed ca. 466/65 BCE to celebrate the chariot victory at Delphi of Arcesilas IV of Cyrene. That poetic work is Pindar's longest poem that integrates many earlier versions from Homer (vv. 41 onwards), which had been either totally lost or have been preserved in scarce fragments. It introduces a motif not known from earlier authors about the journey of the Argonauts to the land of Aetes, son of Helios, argued with the prophetic dream of Pelias. In his dream, the ghost of Phrixus asked him to go to the palaces of Aetes, and to bring home his spirit and the Golden Fleece. In order to understand the message of the dream, Pelias sent envoys to ask the Oracle of Delphi whether the quest was worth undertaking and the immediate reply that he received was to send a ship for the sacred mission as soon as possible. Due to his advanced age, he asked Jason to make the heroic quest instead of him. The analysis of that

³⁹ Nock 1926, pp. 50–51.

⁴⁰ Christopoulos 1991, pp. 205–222.

⁴¹ Homer. *Odys.* 12. 69–72.

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motif additionally allowed associating the journey of the Argonauts with a journey Beyond,⁴² in which the return of the spirit of the deceased person was of basic importance, whereas the oracle merely unlocked and set in motion the long chain of events. However, and although the journey resembled ostensibly the *catabasis* of Orpheus in the kingdom of Hades to take Eurydice out of the kingdom of the dead, it occurred in a horizontal plan, far in the East, in the land of (the son) of the Sun (Aeetes)!

Regions burdened with the characteristics of “otherness” and the World Beyond, marked by monsters and figures outside the civilised world, were introduced in the basic structure of the preserved variants of *Argonautica*.⁴³ The hybrid figure of the centaur, marked by the deforming discourse of that “otherness”, has clear marker functions at the border with the World Beyond.

In the Cave of the Centaur Chiron

At the very beginning of the journey of the Argonauts, according to *Orphic Argonautica*, Orpheus performed the necessary libations, rituals and prayers, appealing to the sea deities.⁴⁴

The first stop of the ship *Argo*, according to the poem, was at the foothills of the windy Mount Pelion, overgrown with trees, from where the cave of Chiron, “the wisest and justest of all the centaurs”,⁴⁵ was seen as a small black spot, Peleus sent to him his son Achilles to study the chords of the harp⁴⁶ and to receive a sensible and good upbringing. He proposed to stop and

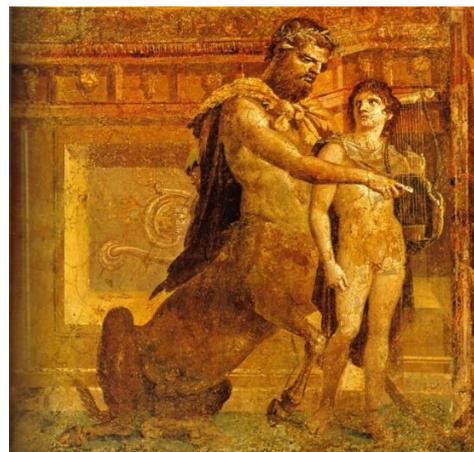


Fig. 5.

The Centaur Chiron instructs Achilles, [fresco from Herculaneum, 1st century AD]. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiron>

⁴² Farnell 1930, I, p.148; Fehr 1936, p. 85; Burton 1962, p. 160.

⁴³ Krevans 2000, pp. 69–84; Hunter 1989, pp. 10–12; Karanika 2010, pp. 391–410; Sistakou 2008, pp. 311–340; Stephens 2008, pp. 96–97, and others.

⁴⁴ *OA* 333–352; *Kyriakidis* 2007.

⁴⁵ Hom. *Il.* 11.832.

⁴⁶ Val. Flacc. *Arg.* 1.407–409.

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see his boy. After the guests were welcomed and feasted by the host in his cave, some of the Argonauts insisted on a musical contest with the lyre between the centaur and Orpheus. Orpheus refused initially out of respect for Chiron's seniority, but the Centaur convinced him to accept the challenge.⁴⁷ The host took the beautiful lyre from the hands of Achilles and started to sing first about the conflict between Centaurs and Lapiths, and about Heracles who interfered in that conflict. Orpheus chose to sing a hymn about the creation of the world and the birth of the gods –from Chaos to Uranus, Brimo, Bacchus and the Giants, resorting indisputably to potential Orphic doctrinal sources.⁴⁸

This is again an interpolation of the motif of the animals and Nature enchanted by the miraculous power of Orpheus' music.⁴⁹ In the depth of Chiron's cave the very rocks reflected the song and started ringing: the wild animals sat listening around the cave and the birds had lowered their wings as if they were tired and had forgotten their nests. That story is absent in *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius, where Chiron merely stepped down on the coast from the Pelion Heights with his wife to show to Peleus his young son Achilles and to wave to the Argonauts, wishing them a safe journey home,⁵⁰ and to mark the starting point of the dangerous journey of the Argonauts. This can be perceived as a mythological precedent echoing an earlier campaign of the Argonauts and secondary artistic interpolation that reinterpreted and gave a secondary explication in a broader plan of the motif *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* as a peculiar vision on the perspective of the journey of the Argonauts Beyond.

The myth about the journey of the Argonauts evoked interest in the Roman world long before the late Roman Republic.⁵¹ It came alive both in vase painting⁵² and in early Latin drama:⁵³ two tragedies devoted to Medea are attributed to Ennius, at least two more

⁴⁷ *OA* 406–410.

⁴⁸ Karanika 2017, pp. 124–136.

⁴⁹ *OA* 431–441.

⁵⁰ Apoll. Rhod. *Arg.* II. 553–558.

⁵¹ Braund 1993, pp. 11–17 with literature.

⁵² Blatter 1984, pp. 591–599.

⁵³ Arcellaschi 1990.

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are known by Pacuvius and Accius accordingly.⁵⁴ However, the complete narrative of the myth in Latin did not appear before *Argonautica* by Publius Terentius Varro *Atacinus* (82–35 BCE), which –according to the stern judgement of Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (Quint. 10. 1 87)– was merely a translation of Apollonius Rhodius. Unfortunately, we learn about that only from the fragments.⁵⁵

On the other hand, Gaius Valerius Flaccus followed a similar –but not identical– scheme to that of *Orpheus' Argonautica* in his *Argonautica*,⁵⁶ composed in eight books in 70 CE and dedicated to Vespasian, which remained unfinished.⁵⁷ Chiron with the infant Achilles in his hands came down from Mount Pelion to join the sacrificial feast of the Argonauts on the seashore on the night before the ship sailed off.⁵⁸ The poetic contest between the two soothsayers is presented indirectly to create a contrast between the epic narrative of the Homer-type *rhapsodes* (Chiron) and the epyllian epos of the song of the Thracian.⁵⁹ The words of Peleus (1.255–273) present the heroic *παιδεία* of the Centaur, which he was to suggest to Achilles with his epic songs about wars and battles. However, Valerius Flaccus did not include them in his *Argonautica*, while he adduced the entire poetic narrative of Orpheus, who –unlike the *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius and the *Orphic Argonautica*– had nothing in common with Orphic theogony, but presented the prehistory of the Golden Fleece and the mythology of Phryxus and Helle. The episode marks the start of the perilous undertaking and its eschatological projections.

The motif of the contest between Orpheus and Chiron was revived– often only by association– in the works of the Roman poets from the so-called “Golden” and especially from the “Silver Age.” The scene with the magic power over Nature of Orpheus’ song and music –taken out of its initial context– appeared in the chorus score of *Hercules Oetaeus*

⁵⁴ Braund 1993, p. 13; Arcellaschi 1990.

⁵⁵ Courtney 1993, pp. 236–253.

⁵⁶ Val. Flacc. *Arg.* 255–273.

⁵⁷ White 2007, pp. 252–264.

⁵⁸ Val. Flacc. *Arg.* 1. 255.

⁵⁹ Hunter 2005, pp. 149–168, see particularly pp. 153–155; Torres-Murciano2015, pp. 165–184, see particularly p. 174.

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(1031–1060) of Pseudo-Seneca,⁶⁰ in whose description it is located around Mount Athos, beneath the heights of the Thracian Rhodope:

True sang the bard beneath the heights of Thracian Rhodope, fitting the word to his Pierian lyre, e'en Orpheus, Calliope's blest son, that naught for endless life is made. At his sweet strains the rushing torrents' roar was stilled, and, forgetful of their eager flight, the waters ceased their flow; and, while the river stayed to hear, the far Bistonians thought their Hebrus had failed the Getan. The woods came with their birds to him, yea, perched among the trees they came; or if, in the high air soaring, some wandering bird caught sound of the charming song, his drooping wings sank earthward. Athos broke off his crags, bringing the Centaurs as he came, and next to Rhodope he stood, his snows melted by the music; the Dryad, leaving her oaken haunts, sped to the singer's side. To hear thy song, with their very lairs the wild beasts came, and close to the fearless herds the Marmaric lion crouched; does felt no fear of wolves, and the serpent fled her gloomy den, her venom at last forgot.⁶¹

Silius Italicus (ca. 28–ca. 103 CE) in his Latin epic poem *Punica* also made a hint in Book 11 (451, 460, p. 151)⁶² about the scene with the contest between Chiron and Orpheus, in which Centaur remains enchanted by the musical talents of the Thracian singer.

Precisely these reflections of the mythical-literary narrative, resurrected by the Roman poets, seems to be projected in the outlines group of images of the scene *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals*, in which the image of the Centaur is also integrated: simultaneously functioning as a guard of the entrance to the World Beyond, and personalised in the figure of the wise centaur Chiron.

CONCLUSION

⁶⁰ See *Herc. Fur.* 569–576; *Med.* 625–629.

⁶¹ Translated by Frank Justus Miller. Available at: <https://www.theoi.com/Text/SenecaHerculesOetaeus2.html> [Last access 5 February 2021]

⁶² Rupert 1798.

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The ancient artist (and the person who ordered his work of art?) associated in the scene with Orpheus surrounded by the animals enchanted by his music and song the figure of the mystagogue -priest and the magician, who were able to pass through spaces and to guide from the world of the living to the World Beyond. The image of a centaur in combination with Pan/Silenus builds harmoniously not only a Dionysian context, but also adds funerary aspects to the analysed composition. Other fantastic mythological figures, some of which markedly exotic, additionally indicating the World Beyond and its deforming discourse, are also intertwined in the theme among the real wild animals.

The analysis of some mythological figures in the pictorial composition *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* in the context of the combined evidence from the mythical-poetic tradition about the journey of the Argonauts could seek a possible literary context of the scene. In the light of the outlined mythical-poetic background, the scene would function as an impressive visualisation of the faith in the ability of (some?) mortals, possibly belonging to certain religious communities (connected with Christian Gnosticism), to perform unimpeded the transition after the end of their days on earth under the competent leadership of Orpheus and his mystic music/song. Gnosticism comprised numerous different dualistic teachings and mysterial sects that flourished precisely in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, before its decline in the 4th century and its blending with other movements. The period between the 2nd and the 3rd century was also the time of the most intensive propagation of the pictorial theme *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals*. Such an interpretation would explain the presence of the scene predominantly in sepulchral constructions and a marked funerary. The images of the scene in which fantastic mythological figures are absent could be interpreted as reduced and simplified visualisations of the theme that can be reconstructed here based on mythical-literary reminiscences.

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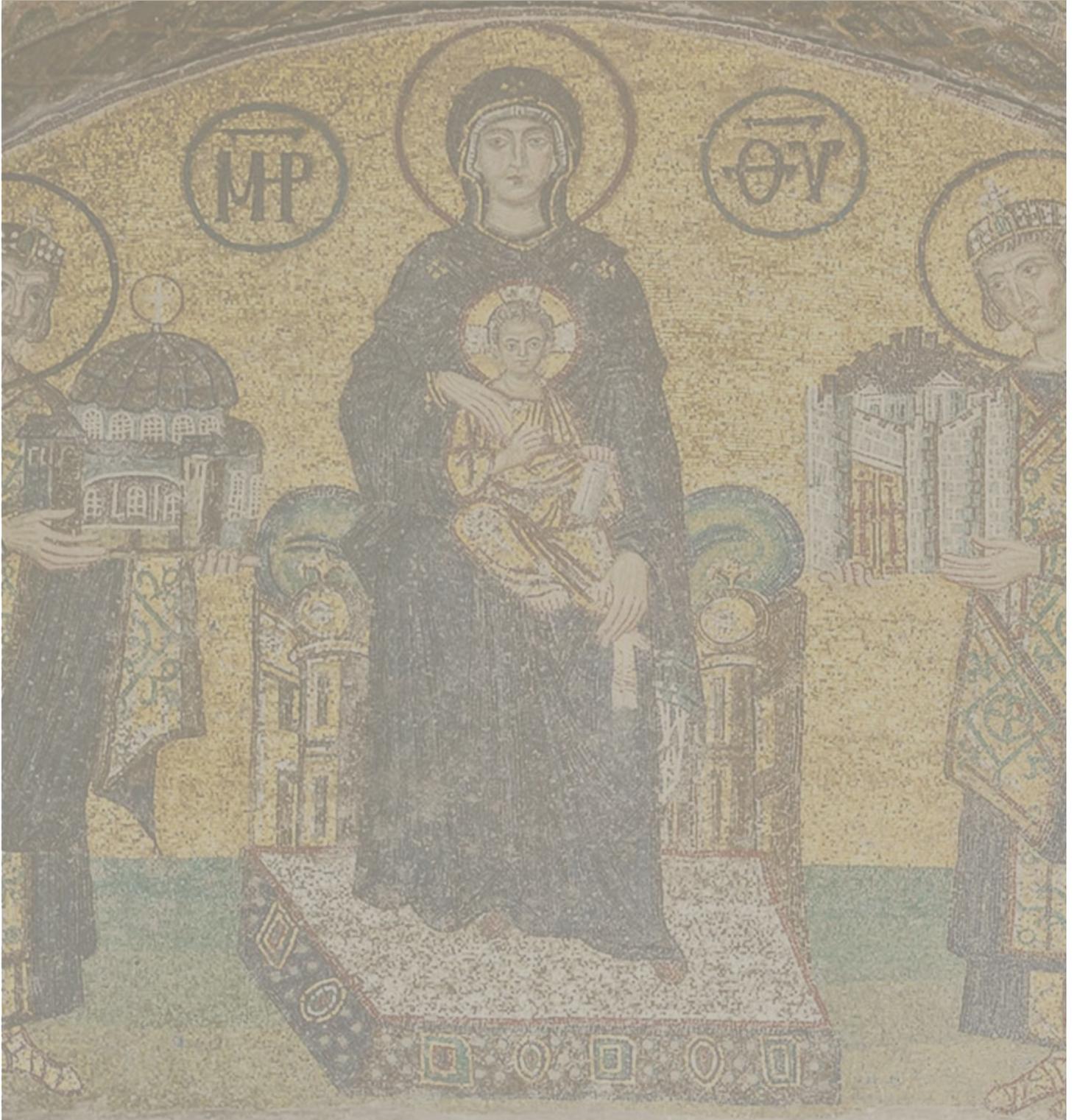
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