The Derveni Papyrus: Problems of Edition, Problems of Interpretation

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1. Introduction. Main problems.

My aim is to allude summarily to the problems in editing and interpreting the Derveni papyrus and to explain the solutions I have adopted in my new edition of the text.\(^1\)

In brief, the problems are the following:

a) Since the preservation of the papyrus was an exceptional case from a formal, or palaeographic, point of view, we cannot compare this text with other similar ones.

b) The content of the text also makes it a unique item; we cannot easily define what kind of work it is nor determine its author. The author comments both on some rituals and on an Orphic poem with philosophical and religious aims, and we can locate him only within the allegorist trend of interpretation, which we already knew through Plato, and remark on some points of contact between him and other authors.\(^2\)

c) Last but not least, the Derveni papyrus contains a text in which other texts are quoted. We have, therefore, not only two levels of the text and, as a result, of its edition (i.e. the Orphic poem and the commentary on it), but also two levels of analysis of religious facts (i.e. the original one, provided by priests and believers, and the commentator's philosophical one).


Regarding the edition of the text, I have decided to present the edition of the literally quoted fragments, as well as those passages relevant to the reconstruction of Orphic theogony quoted by the commentator. I added also the fragment of the *Hymn to Demeter*, quoted as Orpheus' work, and two supposedly Homeric passages, which I also consider to be clearly originated in the Orphic corpus, although stemming not from the theogony, as the others do. Additionally, I have presented some papyrus fragments as evidence about Orpheus or Orphism, since they allow us a wider knowledge about the activities of Orphic priests or about rites attributed to Orpheus.

Nevertheless, provided its importance, I decided to publish the complete papyrus as an appendix, in order to recuperate in its integrity the task of the anonymous author. I would like to review briefly each of these aspects, underlining in particular the problem I have mentioned last, the existence of two textual levels within the papyrus.

For the edition of the theogony, apart from the passages that the commentator quotes literally, we have others in which the exact quote is lost, but the commented words allow us to recuperate the text.

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In this aspect, it is particularly helpful the fact that Orphic literature is elaborated upon itself, a reason why we find some identical or very similar verses to those quoted in the papyrus in subsequent theogonic poems, incorporated to a new redaction of the text. This is the case of the verse Ἴης πρῶτος [γένετο, Ἴης] ὅστις [ἀργυρόσων], commented in the papyrus (col. XVII 2ff., XVIII 1ff.) (OF 14.1) and that we can easily reconstruct because it appears in two later Orphic theogonies (cf. OF 31.1 and 243.1). In certain cases, we can even count on some important additional help. One of the passages of Derveni’s theogony is also quoted in a scholium to Homer, adding another half verse not attested in those quoted in the papyrus (schol. in Il. Φ 195, V 95 Erbse, OF 16).

In other instances, it has been the formulaic character of the epic text or the genius of modern authors that has allowed us to reconstruct the lost verse or verses.

On the other hand, the text that had served as model to the commentator was what was reconstructed in the theogony’s or hymns’ edition, which permitted the introduction of orthographic corrections (such as ν instead of final μ before labial), changes of nominatives for vocatives (OF 398) or the composition of a verse from three or four passages of the commentary.³

### 3. Prose statements about rites.

With regards to the texts referring to rites, the situation is more difficult because they deal with a religious situation about which our information is scarce. Just to mention some specific problems, certain μάγοι are quoted, which are interpreted by some as being Persian magoi, others think they are charlatans, and others assume they are Orphic priests. I would argue that the latter is the most plausible option. In a recent publication, I have proposed they are in fact those professionals referred to by later scholars as Orpheotelestes, since their functions fully correspond, and Orpheotelestes is a term never documented within Orphic circles, which seems to suggest that it is a term originating in an outside vision of the whole phenomenon.⁴

However, in this case, we can also call upon the assistance of external accounts, which have enabled us to suggest that the small fragment I 78 in which we can read a sigma and the letters νηφ[ could belong to the first columns referring to the Erynies, since the adjective νηφάλιος “unmixed with wine” appears in a series of records related to the offers to the Erynies.⁵ I think that the papyrus would also refer to this

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character of the offerings to the underworld goddesses.⁶

In every single case, the apparatus of *loci similes* and the commentaries to the critical apparatus allow us to bring forth texts which could facilitate the interpretation of the papyrus.

It is not my intention to engage on discussions on authorship, but, with the help once again of the *loci similes*, I would like to emphasize the connections that the text presents not only with the Presocratics, but also with the Stoics. I present both sets of materials to give the reader the possibility of sorting out this difficult situation.

4. Theogony and commentary.

A great deal of the interest created by the Derveni Papyrus, and of its difficulty, derives from the existing interrelation between both texts: theogony and commentary. The poem in hexameters (referred to as hymn by the commentator)⁷ attributed to Orpheus, includes the narration of Zeus' ascension to power among the gods, relating afterwards mythic events before and after this central episode: previously, the first deity, Night, her offspring Uranus, to whom his son Cronus "made something terrible,"⁸ and the last of the gods on the lineage, Zeus, son of Cronus, who overthrows his father and assumes power. Subsequently, the absolute ruling of Zeus, consolidated by a two-fold agenda consisting of swallowing what seems to be the phallus of Heaven – which allows him to return every created thing within himself and recreate them, rationally this time – and the incest with his mother, in order to become forefather and descendant of himself, thus avoiding being replaced in power.⁹

In the commentator's hands, this text of Orpheus, which he considers allegorical, becomes a physical cosmogony, in-between the Presocratics' cosmogony and the later Stoics', according to which Zeus is Air (ἀήρ) and Mind (Νοῦς) and always exists, and acts upon the primary particles of matter to generate the things that become.

A good example of this interpretation of the commentator could be col. XIV 2ss.

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toútou oúv tòy 'Króonov
gevésbhai fêsiw ék tou 'Hlîou têj Gê, õtí aítian èșexe
dia tòu ἱλios krouésebaí proš álhlâa.
dia toútou lêgei 'òs méy 'érêxên.' tò 8' õtì toútowí:

'Óuârânos Êûfrôndhês, õs prôtiítos ñássilëüseñ.'

krouótita tôu Nóûm prôs álhlâl[a] 'Króonov' õumâsâs,

'méga rëzêi' fêsi tôu Oûrânov 'àp[ai]rëbëhínci gâr
þíμi bâsïlëiân aútbûn. 'Króonov' ìë ëûmômáacu õpò tôu
ë[p]yov aútûn kàta t|òv aútûn l|óguov.
tôn ëlôntwô yûr ápânt[ô]v [oûpôw krouómê]ûov
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⁷ Col. VII 2 and probably, col. II 8.
⁸ Col. XIV 5.
So (Orpheus) is stating that this "Kronos" "by Earth was born" to the Sun, because (Mind) caused the elements to be "thrust" (krouesthai) against each other on account of the sun. This is why (Orpheus) says "he who did a great deed."

"Sky son of Night, he who first was king." After (Orpheus) has named Mind (Nous) "Kronos" because he thrust (krouonta) the elements against one another, he states that he "did a great deed" to Sky: for he states that (Sky) had his kinship taken away. (Orpheus) named him "Kronos" after his action, and the other elements in accord with the same principle. For when all the things that exist were not yet being struck, Mind, as determining the creation, received the designation Ouranos (i.e. Determining Mind). And he is stating that (Sky) had his kingship taken away when the things that exist were thrust together ...

He makes "etymological" analysis of the gods' names and states that when Orpheus says Heaven (Οὐρανός), he actually refers to a οὐριζων Nous "determining Mind" (i.e. determining the creation), while when he says Cronus he means κρούων Nous, that is "striking Mind," what makes things strike against each other. And he also claims that Orpheus' expression concerning Cronus himself as "having done something terrible" does not refer to the castration of Heaven, but to the fact that Cronus changed the distribution of the particles because he made them strike against each other. The commentator is thus combining Leucippus' atomic theory with the intervention of Νους from Anaxagoras. And so on. This relation has been widely and thoroughly studied, so I think it unnecessary to dwell more into it.

5. Religious rite and philosophical interpretation.

There is an aspect of the question, however, that has received much less attention. In columns I to VII and XX the author does not comment the text, but rather alludes to certain religious rites concerning the Erynies, the role of Justice, the terrors of Hades, the incantations (ἐπωδαί) performed by μάγοι, in what seems to be a reference to δρώμενα and όρώμενα of certain rites of which the Orphic poem would be the λεγόμενα. When I say that this aspect has received much less attention, I am not referring to the analysis of religious contents, which have indeed been studied, but to the fact that, despite Henrichs' statement: "the author of the papyrus speculates about the underlying meaning of the ritual which he is describing," the vast majority of scholars have not stressed the interpretative task the

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11 It would be enough to mention the discussion at Princeton in A. Laks and G.W. Most, op.cit. (above, n. 4) and the studies by Betegh, Jourdan, and Kouremenos in T. Kouremenos, G.M. Parássoglou, and K. Tsantsanoglou, op.cit. (above, n. 10).

commentator is also undertaking when he refers to the rites. Indeed, the commentator of the Derveni papyrus, in the same way that he lifts verses literally from the text to interpret them afterwards in a certain sense, also describes certain practices in order to provide an interpretation in a certain direction thereafter. In other words, similarly to what happens with a literary text, where we find two levels of the text belonging to different points in time, one to the old poem and the other linked to the subsequent commentary, there are also two levels in the text in connection to the rites, one is the old rite, described as it was performed, and the other is the modern interpretation the commentator provides of such rite. Needless to say, the second does not have to correspond to the reality of the first, that is, the interpretation provided by the commentator of one ritual aspect does not have to be necessarily what its participants considered to be its raison d'être.

The part of the papyrus where this twofold level is most clearly shown is in col. II 9, in which we can read now, according to the very plausible reconstruction of Tsantsanoglou13 τὸ τούτων δὲ τὰ σημαίνουν "and their meaning." Τούτων refers to the rites in honour of the Erinyes that have been simply described before: χ λαοὶ σταγόσιν [χ]έονται (l. 5) "libations are poured downs in drops," ἐξαρέτους τιμᾷς [χ]ρη ... νεὶσκεια (6–7) "one must offer exceptional honors," δοῦναι θ'14 (sc. [χ]ρη) ἐκάστοις ὁρνιθεῖοι τι κλεισθέν (7, according to my own interpretation,)15 "to each of them must be given a caged little bird" and [ὑ]μούς ἄρμοστο[υ]ς τῇ τη μούσ[ι]κη "hymns adapted to the music."

In using the term τὰ σημαίνουν "meaning", the commentator states that these rites have a meaning, as Orpheus' verses do, a meaning that was not explained in the rites, but rather had to be extracted from them by an analyst, given his knowledge of reality.

Once stated that the commentator believes that he can, not only describe and transmit the rite, but also explain its meaning, let us see some examples of how he does it by means of using present linguistic indicators. These are, basically, the use of the verb "to be," since often when it is stated that A is B, A is how the rite is performed and B the interpretation, and, secondly, causative expressions, such as ὅτι, γάρ or τούτου ἐνέκα, since rites, as such, were not interpreted. When they are, the reason of the rite was simply described as an etiological myth explaining the reason of its existence, but the aim that each part of the rite might have had was left unstated. Therefore, if there is a causal explanation, it is the commentator's own intervention.

Let us see how this can be illustrated in column VI 1–12:

[... the text is not fully legible here ...]

13 In the recent edition by Kouremenos, Parássoglou, and Tsantsanoglou, op. cit. (above, n. 10).
... prayers and sacrifices placate the souls. An incantation by *magoi* can dislodge daimons that become a hindrance; daimons that are a hindrance are vengeful souls. The *magoi* perform the sacrifice for this reason, as if they are paying a blood-price. Onto the offerings they made libations of water and milk, with both of which they also make drink-offerings. They sacrifice cakes which are countless and many-humped, because the souls too are countless. Initiates make a first sacrifice to Eumenides in the same way as *magoi* do; for the Eumenides are souls. Hence a person who intends to sacrifice to the gods, first must liberate a bird, with whom they fly, with the result that the evil (?)...16

In ll. 4–5 the commentator thinks he knows the reason (τούτου ἐνεκε[μ]) why the μάγοι perform εὐχαί, θυσίαι and ἐπωδίας, and this cause is explained by a comparison ὡσπερεῖ. I think there is a mistake in the interpretation of the passage according to Jourdan.17

Jourdan thinks that the commentator sees in the pretended expiation less honorable interests of the *magoi* (which she translates as "charlatans"), on the basis that ὡσπερεῖ always indicates at least two levels of understanding ("signale de moins toujours deux niveaux de compréhension"). She is right, but not in the sense she interprets the passage: I rather think that the commentator expresses a comparison, because ποινὴν ἀποδιδόντες is a legal formula. As stated by Jourdan herself (38), ποινὴ refers to the price that has to be paid for the blood shed, being therefore the fine to be paid to redeem a fault ("le prix à payer pour le sang versé. Il s’agit d’une amende destinée à laver d’une faute"). The commentator uses the term ὡσπερεῖ because he wants to express that, similarly to the fact that when a person commits a blood crime (in the justice of men), he has to pay for it by punishment, also the soul that commits a (religious) fault has to pay for it by means of a sacrifice.

The same could be said of lines 3–4 if we accept (I do) the reconstruction of Janko (3) δαίμονες ἐμπο[δῶν ὄντες εἰσί] / and of Tsantsanoglou (4) ψ[υχαὶ τιμωροῖ] “daimons that are a hindrance are vengeful souls.” The rite tries to move the daimons away, but the idea that the daimons are vengeful souls does not belong to the rite, it is rather the interpretation of the commentator.

A little further down, in line 8, there is a causative conjunction, ὅτι, that betrays once again the task undertaken by the commentator (ll. 7–8):

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16 Translation by Janko (*op.cit.* [above, n. 10]), except underlined words – my own translation – based on a different reading of the text.
17 Jourdan, *op.cit.* (above, n. 4) 38.
μην ἰδοὺ τὰ πόπανα
θύουσιν, ὅτι καὶ σί ψυχαὶ ἄναριθμοί εἰσι

They sacrifice cakes which are countless and many-humped (many-knobbled) are the cakes for sacrifice, because the souls too are countless.\textsuperscript{18}

The commentator explains, in this case, that the great number of offerings of many-humped cakes is due to the fact that the great number of offerings corresponds to the great number of souls present in the rite, understanding as such vengeful souls, since, let us recall, the δαίμονες are vengeful souls according to him.

According to the causative \textit{γὰρ} in line 9: Εὔμενίδες \textit{γὰρ} ψυχαὶ εἰσιν, we have to attribute to the commentator, and neither to the μάγοι nor to the participants in the propitiatory rite of the Eumenides, the idea that these are in fact souls.

I think the examples quoted are sufficient to give us an idea of the complexity involved in editing and interpreting the Derveni Papyrus.

\textsuperscript{18} Translation by Janko, \textit{op.cit.} (above, n. 10).