

THE LAND OF ORCUS, A RECURRING THEME IN TIME

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Rezumat. Lumea de apoi a romanilor era un tărâm în care aveau acces doar sufletele defuncțiilor, care mergeau la judecata de apoi, tărâm în care uneori pătrundeau și unii eroi în urma unor ritualuri de inițiere. Acest drum al sufletului trecea prin tărâmul lui Orcus, apoi prin Câmpiile Acherusiene pentru ca apoi sufletele să fie triate și îndreptate fie în Tartarul pedepselor fie în Câmpiile Elizee. Acest drum este unul presărat cu obstacole, brăzdat de râurile infernale, este condiționat de săvârșirea ritualurilor de înmormântare de către cei rămași în viață, speranța finală a călătoriei fiind sălășluirea sufletelor în Câmpiile Elizee. Scopul studiului nostru este acela de a prezenta prima parte a călătoriei sufletului defuncțiilor prin tărâmul lui Orcus, identificând diferitele căi de acces, așa cum reies ele din literatura latină și perpetuarea acestei călătorii prin creștinare în credințele actuale legate de călătoria sufletului creștin prin lumea de apoi.

Cuvinte cheie: Orcus, lumea de apoi, infern, suflet, literatura latină.

1. Entries to Inferno

The Roman afterworld was a realm that was only accessible to the souls of the departed on their way to the Last Judgement. There were some heroes who entered the afterworld but only after strict initiation rituals. In Greek and Latin mythology, the realm of Hades was only accessible through dark underground passages or by sailing far towards the west over the boundaries of Okeanos (the Western Sea) which surrounded the world.

The Romans believed that the entries to the Inferno were situated in accessible, but remote and hidden places. The entries are described as large cave entries, often identified as the open jaws of Orcus. The location of the entries to the afterworld is described with geographical details: in remote mountain peaks or on top of high cliffs, places which often have deep caves, hidden by dense forests, or sometimes protected by the raging waters of the sea. Virgil places one of the gateways to Inferno in the swamp of Acheron, near Cumae, in the Campania Region in Italy, today Lake Fusaro. The swamp was considered one of the points through which Acheron, the infernal river passed¹. There was another gateway besides this in the same region, in the vicinity of the modern village Ariano Irpino², near a volcanic river³. Others entries were in a cave in Thessaly; in Scythia on the northern shore of the Black Sea; in Attica at Eleusis; on

¹ Minois, 1998, p. 42.

² Casagrande-Kim, 2012, p. 95.

³ Pfanzen *et alii*, 2014, p. 96.

Boeotian Mount Laphystius⁴; others were in Peloponnese on Cape Tainaron⁵ or Matapan, in Lerna, Troezen or in Corinth⁶.

The entry in the Inferno of Hades is a cave surrounded by black waters with a pestilential smell. Aeneas enters the Inferno of Hades, followed by the Sibyl who lived in the caves of Cumae, after sacrificing “*four black heifers, ... a black-fleeced lamb, ... and a barren heifer*” and he begins his descent in complete darkness: “*On they went, hidden in solitary night, through gloom, / through Dis’s empty halls, and insubstantial kingdom, / like a path through a wood, in the faint light / under a wavering moon, when Jupiter has buried the sky / in shadow, and black night has stolen the color from things*”⁷.

As we mentioned before, the Inferno can only be visited by initiated people⁸. Aeneas must seek the help of Sibyl in order to visit Anchises in the Inferno. Sibyl asks Aeneas to bring her a golden bow which she offers as a “*rightful tribute*”⁹ to Persephone. The Sibyl acts as a mystagogue for Aeneas¹⁰. In the 2nd century AD, Lucian of Samosata also imagines the descent into the Inferno undertaken by Menippus with the help of a wizard. He must also perform a specific ritual in order to trick the guardians and masters of the underworld. In his quest for the gold branch, Aeneas is helped by doves, the birds of the goddess Aphrodite. The motif of the birds which lead the way derives from the legends of colonization and the fact that he is helped by two birds may very well be an influence of the legend of the two founders of Rome. The doves may be a parallel with the dove who led the Argonauts through the clashing rocks. The gold branch is taken from an oak tree, just like the Golden Fleece, both situated in a dark forest and both glowing in the dark¹¹.

The rituals of Persephone involve a very important branch, without which people could not participate in the initiation ritual. It is well known that young apprentices of Persephone in Eleusis had a pilgrim stick made from a single branch from a myrtle tree or from several sticks brought together by rings. Consequently, by bringing a branch and offering it to Persephone, the queen of the Afterworld, Aeneas behaves as an Eleusian apprentice who, obviously, had to take a bath before the initiation ritual¹².

Aeneas is also warned that it is easier to descend into the inferno, than to exit it: “*the path to hell is easy: / black Dis’s door is open night and day: / but to retrace your steps, and go out to the air above, / that is work, that is the task*”¹³.

The land of Orcus, the hallway to the afterworld, is the first region accessed by any living or dead soul on their way to the afterworld. This region is governed by

⁴ Casagrande-Kim, 2012, p. 98-100.

⁵ Pfanz *et alii*, 2014, p. 110.

⁶ Casagrande-Kim, 2012, p. 96.

⁷ Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI, verse 268-272.

⁸ Pfanz *et alii*, 2014, p. 92

⁹ Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1994, *creanga*.

¹⁰ Bremmer, 2009, p. 183-208.

¹¹ Bremmer, 2009, p. 183-208.

¹² Bremmer, 2009, p. 183-208.

¹³ Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI, verses 126-129.

Orcus¹⁴, who is represented in a quasi-human form, with an enormous open mouth that swallows the souls of humans¹⁵. The land of Orcus stretches from one of the entries situated on the surface of the earth to the shores of the river Styx or the other infernal rivers, Acheron and its affluent Cocytus before it flows into the river Styx, the border between Orcus and the Acherusian Fields.

The land of Orcus is an independent territory, with well-defined limits and represents a bridge between the land of the living and the land of the dead, a place of transcendence by nature. The rivers of the land – Cocytus, Acheron, and Styx are slow due to the mud and mire which prevail in the landscape. All the heroes must pass the land of Orcus on their way to the souls they seek to meet, while the souls of the recently departed hurry to cross it on their way to their final destination, either Tartarus or the Elysian Fields. The Romans considered it more appropriate and acceptable that the sinners should receive their eternal doom in Tartarus than to linger eternally in the land of Orcus, in a state of *larvae*¹⁶, i.e. not belonging to any category or class of souls. Mortals are not allowed entry, neither during their first voyage, to their final resting place, nor during the annual festivities of the dead *Parentalia – Feralia*¹⁷ (February 13–21), *Lemuria*¹⁸ (May 9, 11, 13), which were described by Ovid. During these festivities, the gates between the two realms open. On the three days of *Lemuria*, the dead returned to visit the houses of their descendants. The spirits appeared through these gates only when they were deliberately summoned through necromantic rituals or in the case of recent deaths, as the souls had not reached their final destinations and were still awaiting their judgment in the land of Orcus¹⁹.

The fear of Orcus is revealed by the gold leaves placed on the bodies of the dead and which were found in tombs in Greece. They were often placed in the mouth of the deceased and carried clear instructions for the guidance of the departed souls through the land of Orcus through their final destination in the afterworld²⁰. The gold leaves give clear instructions to “*turn right*”²¹ at the crossroads.

The souls of the deceased descend on their journey on a path that becomes a larger “*sacred way*” across the gates. At this stage of their journey, the deceased travel by themselves, the souls are left to find their way alone. It is possible that souls received all the required information to reach Minos during the days of their wake, and were given gold sheets to ease the judgment and shorten the passage to the final destination.

On their journey through the land of Orcus, the souls must reach the lake of Mnemosyne²², with guarded shores, and must drink from its waters in order to proceed

¹⁴ Panayotakis, p. 237.

¹⁵ Casagrande-Kim, 2012, p. 93.

¹⁶ Marinescu, 2005, p. 85.

¹⁷ Ferrari, 2003, p. 355, 492, 634, 725.

¹⁸ Fredouille, 1974, p. 169.

¹⁹ Casagrande-Kim, 2012, p. 93.

²⁰ Casagrande-Kim, 2012, p. 88.

²¹ Bremmer, 2009, p. 183–208.

²² In Greek mythology, she was the goddess of memory, she was also a titaness, one of the daughter of Uranus and Gaea.

in their journey. Upon reaching the lake, the souls must say the following incantation: *“I am the son of Earth and starry Heaven, but my race is heavenly: know this you too. I am dry with thirst and dying. Give me quickly water, from that which flows fresh from the lake of Mnemosyne”*²³.

The journey is made in complete darkness, the souls go by empty houses, rivers, and a tree and guardians, which are the main features of the Roman Orcus. Horace and Apuleius represent this as an easy path, but inevitable and unidirectional, the road to Death. Seneca describes the road through Orcus as a landscape with large, open fields, which are little visible in the eternal night²⁴.

The land of Orcus is a barrier which divides the passage into two distinct segments. The first half of the road goes straight, mainly in the dark, whereas the second marks a clear change in landscape, is more intricate, and proceeds through forests and rivers.

Aeneas and the Sibyl encounter even from entry four major categories of grim characters who wait for every passer.

–Grief and vengeful care,

–Pallid sickness, sad Old age, Fear and persuasive Hunger, vile Need and Poverty;

–Ruin and Misfortune;

–On the right sit Sleep and Evil pleasures of the mind, and, on the left, death-dealing War and the steel chambers of Fury and mad Discord.

Other *“haunting characters”*²⁵ also live here, such as War, Disease, and the vengeful Eumenides. An enormous dark elm tree where empty dreams are taking shelter is situated in the middle of the realm. The two visitors find themselves suddenly surrounded by winged monsters and the most horrific creatures of Greek mythology: centaurs and Scylla, Briareus with one hundred arms, and the Lernaean Hydra, the fire-breathing Chimera, Gorgons, and Harpies. They are only frightening shadows that protect the road from the gates to the most distant corners of the land of Orcus²⁶.

2. The road towards the passage

After the land of Orcus, Aeneas and Sibyl continue their journey on the path which leads them to the shores of the river Styx where Charon awaits the souls of the departed. Virgil describes the river Styx as a marshy land that separates the souls of the unburied from those from the other side who are led towards their final destination²⁷. The landscape of this region is dense forests that partially darken the path and rivers, marshes, and muddy pools with reed on the river Styx.

Plutarch clearly states that the rivers have different colors which illustrate their nature and route. As he goes through the gate of Orcus, Aeneas encounters for the first time the running sands of Cocytus which surround a forest that extends to the shores of the river Styx.

²³ Casagrande-Kim, 2012, p. 90.

²⁴ Casagrande-Kim, 2012, p. 103.

²⁵ Bremmer, 2009, p. 183-208.

²⁶ Casagrande-Kim, 2012, p. 104.

²⁷ Casagrande-Kim, 2012, p. 118.

The souls of the dead are crowding to get in the boat, but Charon only accepts those who have been buried according to the tradition. The others, especially those who died in drowning or who were left unburied must linger on the shores of the Styx for one hundred years before being allowed to cross the river. Aeneas encounters some old acquaintances here and talks to them.

The mythical scheme of the visit to the afterworld, in the antique Inferno, is partially preserved in the morning song²⁸ in which the crossroads symbolizes the distinction between the good, situated on the right, rewarding an ideal existence in life, and the evil, on the left, with the torments of the eternal suffering. In Virgil's Inferno, Aeneas and Sibyl also reach a crossroads: on one side, the road leads to the Elysian fields, the place for the most blessed souls, and, on the other side, the road leads to Tartar: "*This is the place where the path splits itself in two / there on the right is our road to Elysium, that runs beneath / the walls of mighty Dis: but the left works punishment / on the wicked, and sends them on to godless Tartarus*"²⁹. In the morning song, by always following the path on the right, to avoid misfortunes and bad judges, souls reach the gates of heaven where, upon entering, they encounter the departed sitting in the shadow of the tree of life³⁰.

It is obvious that the rural imaginary today recognizes an afterworld in which the souls continue their existence and, in order to ensure their peace, souls must be guided during the days of wake and all the proper burial rituals must be performed, all these being very well established in the cult of the dead.

The mythical Orcos is reimagined in popular beliefs as a long journey in which souls have human needs: water, rest, and a rod – a symbol of the traveler. Souls encounter many obstacles on their path and they must overcome them either by paying to cross the gateways or by always choosing the path on the right at the crossroads in order to reach heaven, the geographical guidance of the soul present a better paradigm for understanding afterlife space³¹, a new life after death³².

We conclude that the morning song is an ancestral song that had the role of both preventing souls from becoming ghosts, and guiding the on the proper road to the afterworld, death being only a passage into a new stage.

²⁸ Hurduzeu, 2017, p. 1248.

²⁹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI, verses 540-543.

³⁰ Hurduzeu, 2017, p. 1249.

³¹ Gee, 2017, p. 243.

³² Eliade, 2007, p. 27-28.

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