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WERE THERE BLOODY RITES PASSAGE IN ORPHISM?

Orphic initiates led a way of life (*Orphikos bios*) characterized by abstention from animated food and the rejection of bloody sacrifice. Both prescriptions are traditionally related to the central Orphic myth: the dismemberment of Dionysus and the ingestion of his limbs by the Titans. Quite possible meat consumption would symbolize the dismemberment of the god, the greatest impurity for the Orphics, which would justify its prohibition. However, two texts that are considered key evidence for the study and reconstruction of Orphic rites and beliefs mention explicitly bloody sacrifice and consumption of meat. Firstly, in Euripides' *Cretans* (Fr.472 Kannicht 9-14) the *mystai* claim to lead a pure life from their conversion in initiates, which was, paradoxically, preceded by banquets of raw meat. Secondly, the *Gurob Papyrus* (v. 9-14) refers to the immolation of "a sheep and a male goat" and speaks about eating "the rest of the meat".

In order to overcome the apparent contradiction of both testimonies with Orphic doctrines it could be proposed that these practices were limited to a first ritual of initiation that would be a rite of passage between the status of profane and that of initiate. Only then the people being initiated would celebrate bloody sacrifices and would eat meat, thus identifying themselves with the Titans, their ancestors in some theogonies. Initiates would reach the highest degree of impurity and would begin immediately an expiation process that would comprise purification rites and the strict observance of a series of rules to obtain the longed condition of purity.

Nevertheless, the proposal that such a ritual of initiation existed in Orphism is not free of problems which deserve deeper research. It will also be necessary to examine the literary and iconographic parallels offered by other Greek or Eastern rituals to determine

if the aforementioned Orphic evidence constitutes isolated cases that do not respond to a common ritual pattern or if, on the contrary, these practices can be considered rites of passage to reach the status of initiate.

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