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PAPYRUS ON THE PYRE

THE DERVENI PAPYRUS AND ITS ARCHEOLOGICAL CONTEXT¹

Summary: The paper examines the possible interrelations between the archeological context of the Derveni papyrus and the physical and eschatological doctrines held by its author. On the basis of a brief survey of the archeological data and the comparative material, Betegh argues that the placement of the papyrus is not by chance and that it probably had a role in the ritual. In the next step, he summarises the main results of a reconstruction of the physics and cosmology of the Derveni author, and raises the problem of the connection between the eschatological theme of the first six columns and the physics and cosmic theology of the remainder of the text. Finally, he suggests that the common denominator of all these themes, doctrines and lores is the fire with its cosmological and eschatological role. In this respect, an important claim of the Derveni author could be that the ultimate cosmological and eschatological principle is not fire, as e.g., for Heraclitus, quoted in the papyrus, but fire – in the form of the celestial bodies, the thunderbolt of Zeus, or the funeral pyre – is the instrument with the help of which the intelligent and divine air maintains cosmic order and divine justice.

Key words: Derveni papyrus, funerary ritual, archeology, Orphic.

Practically every paper and presentation on the Derveni papyrus starts with one or two sentences on the circumstances of the discovery. Yet after this brief obligatory introduction, everybody quickly passes on to his or her specific topic, and discusses this or that aspect of the papyrus text. And usually we don't hear anything more about the archeological context. One reason for this may be that the two most relevant publications are relatively recent. After the first preliminary reports published in the sixties, the full archeological description of the Derveni find by Petris Themelis and Ioannes Touratsoglou appeared only in 1997.² On the other hand, Kyriakos Tsantsanoglou published the most germane part of the papyrus – that is its first seven columns – also in 1997.³ What I intend to do in this paper is to take a closer look at the

¹ Parts of this paper are taken over from my PhD dissertation (BETEGH [1999]). I wrote the remainder at the Center for Hellenic Studies, where I received much help from my fellows, especially from Sandra Blakely, Nikolai Grintzer, Jens Holzhausen, Roberto Polito, Gretchen Reydams-Schils, and Sarolta Takács. I presented the penultimate version of this text at Harvard University, where I got useful comments and suggestions from the audience, in particular from Albert Henrichs, Gregory Nagy, and Raphael Woolf.

² THEMELIS–TOURATSOGLOU (1997).

³ TSANTSANOGLOU (1997).

archeological context, and examine the possible connections between the function and content of the papyrus and its place of discovery. First, I shall discuss what the archeological context can tell us about the function, or *Sitz im Leben*, of the papyrus. Then, I shall turn to the text and venture some hypotheses about its relation to the funeral context.

But, first of all, some methodological remarks and disclaimers are in order. Much of what I have to propose is highly hypothetical and tentative. In a way, this is inevitable in the case of the Derveni papyrus, owing to both the nature of the questions to be tackled and the state of preservation of the papyrus. However, some of my suggestions will be even more speculative than usual, and certainly much more speculative than I would normally like. Yet I see no other way in this instance to propose an overall interpretation of the evidence, and it is a challenge to do so. Interpreting the Derveni papyrus is something like bungee jumping for the mind: it can be a lot of fun, but one has to know that it is an extreme sport. What I find especially important is always to make clear how far we can rely on the internal and comparative evidence, and hence just how speculative a given hypothesis is. To elaborate on the bungee jumping analogy: it's always important to know before a jump what kind of rope you are using.

So, let's start where everybody starts – the circumstances of the find – but by giving a more detailed description of it, mainly on the basis of Themelis' and Touratsoglou's recent book. On 15th January, 1962, during the widening of the national road leading from Thessalonica to Kavala, a large unlooted cist grave was discovered at Derveni, some 10 km to the north of Thessalonica. The next day another similar but even larger cist grave came to light 4.5 metres away. The Greek Archaeological Service undertook a systematic excavation of the graves and the surrounding area between January and August 1962, and this survey led to the discovery of five more burials: the looted cist grave *I*, the cist graves *Δ*, *E* and *H*, and the pit grave *Z*. The tombs and their grave goods proved to be of outstanding importance in many respects, but the two most notable objects are the stunning bronze krater with a Dionysiac scene found in tomb *B*,⁴ and the remains of a charred papyrus scroll which was discovered, owing to the attentiveness of P. Themelis, among the remains of the funeral pyre on top of the covering slabs of tomb *A*.

The site was located on the *khôra* of the ancient settlement of Lete. It is not clear however whether or not the burial ground was directly connected with the city. The tombs were built in the pass of Derveni, along the road known as the *via Egnatia*. Tombs *A*, *B* and *Δ*, located close by each other, are similar in architecture and size, and seem to form a group of their own. The walls of the tombs are constructed of large blocks of poros laid in isodomic masonry. In the case of tomb *A* and *B*, the grave was covered with four similar large blocks. Tomb *Δ* was only covered with a wooden ceiling which subsequently collapsed into the tomb and crushed most of the grave goods. The walls of the chambers in all three tombs were coated with plaster and painted. The chamber of tomb *A* had a garland of blue leaves and berries on a red ground, bordered by a yellow and a blue band. The most colourful is tomb

⁴ For the Derveni krater, see GIOURI (1978).

B, where the lower half of the walls was painted red and decorated with a guilloche of branches with blue-red leaves and black berries (perhaps olive). The white plaster of tomb *A* was decorated only with a blue band.

Tombs *A* and *B* were remarkably rich in grave goods. According to the excavators, tomb *A* 'was suffocatingly full of bronze and clay pots, vessels, jewellery and various small objects'.⁵ Particularly notable in this tomb is the large bronze krater that contained the remains of the cremation and those of two wreaths, one of them of gold oak leaves, and the other of gilded bronze with gilded clay berries. Among other vases of clay and bronze (but none in silver or gold) found in tomb *A*, there were three *oinochoai* and other drinking vessels. Other objects included a bronze lamp, many alabaster, some in coloured glass, ivory figurines, bronze rings, several dozen strigils and many knucklebones.

On the basis of the coins, metal vessels and pottery, Themelis and Touratsoglou maintain that 'all the evidence favours a date for the burials in the late 4th to early 3rd century'⁶; this dating also must hold true for the objects found in and on top of tomb *A*.

The remains of the pyres of tombs *A* and *B* and the objects contained in them can offer us some idea of the ritual. The corpse was cremated a few metres from the grave, on top of a richly decorated couch; some of the objects found in the remains of the pyre of tomb *A* seem to have decorated the couch. According to the reconstruction of Themelis and Touratsoglou, the clay column capitals found in the ashes of the pyre formed part of an elaborate structure on which the couch was laid. Other objects found among the remains of the pyre of tomb *A* indicate that some offerings were burnt on the pyre with the body. After cremation the bones were wrapped in cloth and put into the krater, which was then placed in the grave. The grave was finally covered with the covering slabs, and the remains of the pyre thrown on top of the slabs.⁷

Among the remains of the funeral pyre found on top of the covering slabs there were spearheads, a pair of greaves, the remains of a horse's harness and a gilded wreath, various other small objects (including a large number of knucklebones, glass objects and two ivory eyes), fragments of at least six clay column capitals, and, in the north-west corner of the remains, the carbonized remains of a scroll, which would become famous as the 'Derveni papyrus'.⁸

The location of the papyrus in the remains of the pyre of tomb *A* poses an obvious problem. Why was it there? The more skeptical answer, raised first passingly by F. W. Walbank and now considered more seriously by Richard Janko,⁹ is that the

⁵ THEMELIS–TOURATSOGLOU (1997) 193.

⁶ THEMELIS–TOURATSOGLOU (1997) 221.

⁷ MAKARONAS (1963) implied that the pyre was originally burnt where its remains were found, that is, on the covering slabs of the tomb. This, as noted already by GINOUVÈS (1994) 187, cannot be correct, as the krater containing the ashes had to be put into the grave before the covering slabs were placed on top. (Ginouvés, however, mistakenly assigns the papyrus to tomb *B*.)

⁸ For the full catalogue of the objects found in and on tomb *A*, see THEMELIS–TOURATSOGLOU (1997) 28–59.

⁹ WALBANK *apud* KAPSOMENOS (1964–1965) 22 and JANKO (1997) 62. Janko's interest in this possibility is clearly related to his attempt to give a non-religious interpretation of the text.

papyrus was mere scrap, used quite simply to light the pyre. Indeed, we have some evidence about the Roman custom of putting papyrus on the funeral pyre in order to set it alight. Nevertheless this evidence is quite meagre. Both of the two most relevant passages come from Martial. In *Epigr.* 10.97.1 he writes *dum leuis arsura struitur Libitina papyro* ('While the light-heaped pyre was being laid with papyrus for the flame' trans. Ker). Standard editions of Martial connect this line with *Epigr.* 8.44.14 where we read *fartus papyro dum tibi torus crescit* ('while, stuffed with papyrus, your pyre is growing high' trans. Ker). If the two passages attest the same custom, then the latter text implies that one has to think not of a single roll kept whole, but rather a layer of torn papyrus put underneath the wood to help combustion.¹⁰ If so, these texts cannot provide a real parallel for the use of the Derveni papyrus.¹¹

There is, to the best of my knowledge, not a shred of evidence from the Classical or Hellenistic period for a comparable Greek or Macedonian practice of lighting a pyre with a roll of papyrus.

It is also important to note that the roll was not on its own in the remains of the pyre. As mentioned above, some other personal belongings of the person buried in tomb *A* were left among the ashes on top of the covering slabs. For example, a pair of greaves and some spearheads were found there. We can contrast this with the fact that the greaves and arms of the person buried in the neighbouring tomb *B* were neatly placed inside that tomb as valuable objects. And even if we suppose that the person was cremated in his greaves, the presence of other pretty objects, such as the alabaster, would need explanation. The presence of such objects in the remains of the pyre, I would maintain, strengthens the hypothesis that the papyrus was *not* treated as junk paper.

The alternative answer to the question concerning the location of the roll, and the one espoused by most interpreters, is that it was designed to be burnt with the corpse on the pyre, and thus that it had some function in the funerary ritual. In this event, its placement can be compared with other Greek texts found in tombs. These, however, apparently fall in different categories. Some of them have no obvious eschatological implication. For example, a papyrus roll from Hawara (P. Bodl. Ms. Gr. Cl. a. I(P), mid-second c. AD) contains two verses from *Iliad* 1 and the whole of *Iliad* 2,¹² whereas a roll from Saqqarah, also found in a tomb and dated to the fourth century BC – very close to the Derveni papyrus in time – preserves the *Persians* of

¹⁰ Cf. LEWIS (1974) 96.

¹¹ *Anth. Pal.* 9.174.2-6 (fifth c. AD) is sometimes also adduced in this context. The author is speaking here about the revoltingly low wages of teachers, and develops a nice simile: 'Here the nurse brings, perforce, the fee once a month, tying up the wretched pittance in byblus and paper, and puts the contemptible little paper, like a pinch of incense, by the master's seat, as if by a tomb.' (ἐνθα τροφός κατὰ μῆνα φέρει μισθὸν μετ' ἀνάγκης, / βύβλω καὶ χάρτῃ δεσμένη πενίην / ὥς δὲ κάπνισμα τιθεῖ παρὰ τὸν θρόνον, ὥς παρὰ τύμβον, / τὸν μικρὸν χάρτην, τὸν παραριπτόμενον – trans. PATON). This text however does not refer to rolls but to the well-attested use of cheap papyrus (*charta emporetica*) and discarded and torn writing papyrus for wrapping incense. Therefore, this text, also very remote from the Derveni tombs in time, cannot be used as a parallel.

¹² One can compare this find with the testimony of Photius *Bibl.* 190.151a, according to which Cercidas of Arcadia (fourth c. BC) wanted to be buried with a copy of the first two books of the *Iliad*.

Timotheus of Miletus (P. Berol. 9875). Although different hypotheses have been advanced, the function of these rolls in graves remains unclear.¹³

On the other hand, some texts in tombs have an evident eschatological bearing, as we can see most conspicuously in the case of the gold leaves. More and more of these are coming to light, and help to reshape our view of the ancient mystery religions. Furthermore, owing to some momentous new discoveries, the gold leaves are now customarily treated again as 'Orphic' and/or 'Bacchic'.¹⁴ These tiny inscribed gold plates clearly have a place in the tomb, as they were meant to be guides for the deceased in their afterlife journey. The inscribed texts, despite their brevity and enigmatic wording, evince a distinct core of eschatological beliefs with a conception of the nature and fate of the soul as well as an elaborate topography of the underworld.¹⁵

Admittedly, a few verses inscribed on gold leaves are not the same thing as the longer, argumentative prose treatise on the Derveni papyrus – even though I shall try to show later that there might be significant connections between the Derveni text and the gold leaves. There are some indications, however, that papyri could be used for comparable purposes. For example, scholars have surmised on the basis of the archeological data that the papyrus roll found in the right hand of an inhumated person at Callatis could contain a Dionysiac/Orphic text possibly with eschatological content;¹⁶ but this is not more than sheer speculation, because the roll was unfortunately destroyed before anyone could read it.

A further indication may come from Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Theseus in his diatribe against Hippolytus depicts him as an hypocritical Orphic. He first alludes to the vegetarian diet customarily associated with Orphism, and then continues with the following words: 'Having Orpheus as your lord, you revel honouring the smoke of many writings' (Ὀρφέα τ' ἀνακτὶ ἔχων / βάκχευε πολλῶν γραμμάτων τιμῶν καπνοῦς *Hipp.* 953f.). The expression πολλῶν γραμμάτων ... καπνοῦς is usually understood as referring to the trifling or worthless nature of the Orphic texts. The word καπνός could indeed have this secondary meaning;¹⁷ yet, I suggest, Theseus' turn of phrase might be taken just as well as a play on words, also alluding to Orphic books burnt on pyres – such as the one at Derveni.

¹³ TURNER (1980) 76f., for example, raises the possibility that the Hawara case shows imitation of the Egyptian custom of putting a copy of the *Book of the Dead* in the tomb. But see the case of Cercidas, mentioned above, which does not show any apparent reference to Egyptian customs.

¹⁴ For a survey, see PUGLIESE CARRATELLI (1993), to which add also FREL (1994). PARKER (1995) 496ff. has good arguments for the case that the gold leaves can be treated as Orphic.

¹⁵ To complicate things even further, the eschatological relevance of a text cannot in itself guarantee its ritual function in a funeral context. MARTIN-PRIMAVESI (1999) 36–38 argue for instance that the papyrus containing Empedocles' *Physica*, with its demonological story, was used as discarded paper, regardless of its content, for the fabrication of the funeral crown. But this view is also open to debate. (For the alternative, see MOST [1997] 130.) The case of the Empedocles papyrus is certainly different in that the papyrus was torn into pieces for this secondary use, and apparently only a small part of the roll was used, with no attention paid to equip the deceased with the entire text.

¹⁶ See PIPPIDI (1967) 210.

¹⁷ See LSJ sv I. So, e.g., BARRETT (1964) *ad loc.*; HALLERAN (1995) *ad loc.*; LINFORTH (1941) 52f.

We can also add the evidence offered by pictorial representations, the most notable of which is the funeral vase dated 330–320 BC. The vase painting depicts Orpheus with the heroized deceased who holds a papyrus roll in his hand.¹⁸ The scholars who published the vase suggest that this may be taken as a reference to the Orphic custom of fitting the dead out with texts. All these pieces of evidence, both textual and pictorial, refer to the prominent place texts and books had in Orphic circles – a phenomenon that has been analyzed by, among others, Marcel Detienne.¹⁹ But all this is admittedly very far from compelling in the case of the Derveni papyrus. We have to acknowledge, on the other hand, that the lack of comparable evidence might just as well be due to the fact that papyri are very rarely preserved in Greek tombs. And, surely, even more seldom if they were burnt, or meant to be burnt, on funeral pyres.

To conclude, acknowledging all these restrictions and uncertainties, I should still favour the hypothesis that the Derveni roll did have a function in the ritual. This is made likely by the presence of other valuable objects in the remains of the pyre, the specific Orphic concern for eschatology, and the Orphic custom of accompany the dead with texts, and possibly also, as I shall argue, by the special role allotted to fire in the Derveni text.

Let us now turn to the text. The extant text clearly falls into two parts. In the first badly fragmented six columns, the Derveni author gives the explanation of certain eschatological concepts – such as the relationship between daimones, Erinyes, Eumenides and souls – and offers a rationalistic explanation for some ritual, mainly sacrificial, acts. From this part of the text it seems clear that the author also conducted ritual and oracular activities, in the role of *mantis*.

Then, from the seventh column on, up to the end of the extant text, the author gives an allegorical interpretation of a poem attributed to Orpheus. This Orphic poem in hexameters centres on the story of Zeus. The poet tells us how Zeus obtains royal power; that he receives oracular instruction from his father Kronos and also from the primordial divinity Night; then that Zeus ensures his rule by swallowing and then creating anew the entire world, and finally that he started an incestuous relationship with his mother Rhea. In his running commentary on the poem, the Derveni author, as it were, translates this mythical story into a cosmogony.

The rough outlines of the Derveni author's cosmogony are as follows.²⁰ The starting point is an indistinct mass of matter. At this stage, separate entities cannot form because the particles of fire are mixed with the rest of matter and do not let it congeal. Then a cosmic divine Mind (*νοῦς*) – which the Derveni author identifies also with the physical element air and the Zeus of the poem – decides to create the cosmos as we now have it. Knowing that the excessive heat of fire does not allow separate entities to form, this divine Mind separates the particles of fire from the rest, withdrawing them to an appropriate location and thus creating the sun. But the sun

¹⁸ Cf. SCHMIDT (1975).

¹⁹ DETIENNE (1989).

²⁰ For a detailed reconstruction of the author's cosmology, see BETEGH (1999), esp. ch. 3 and 4.

would still have been too large, so Mind scatters the surplus of fire in small chunks all over the sky. This is how the stars are born. Mind fixes the stars at their location by the force of necessity, for otherwise, driven by the force of 'like to like', they would come together and join the mass of the sun, and this would mean the end of the present world order. Through this teleological cosmic activity, divine Mind attains a fine equilibrium. The fire of the sun communicates the required heat, but it does not emit too much heat, which would jeopardize the cosmic order and life on earth.

The author's cosmology clearly turns on the dynamic interplay between fire and air. In the initial situation fire prevents beings from taking shape. But once it is turned into the sun, it becomes the major generative force. The effect is destructive in the first stage and constructive in the second, but not because of any change in fire's activity or power. What fire does through all these cosmic processes is blindly emit its heat without any purpose or intention and with no consideration for its effects. Air, on the other hand, is intelligent and acts purposefully. This is no surprise, since it can also be called Mind. Its most important characteristic is that it is able to put at its own service the motive energy and the mechanical causation triggered off by fire. The air *qua* divine Mind uses the brute force of fire in order to actualize its cosmic vision.

It is interesting to note that earth has very little role in the author's physics, whereas water has apparently no function at all. So much so that the author equates even the god Okeanos of the poem with air, and shows no interest whatsoever when the poet sings about 'rivers and lovely springs' (col. 16).

Perhaps the most perplexing question in the study of the papyrus is that we do not know how these two parts of the text – i.e., the ritual, eschatological discourse of the first columns, on the one hand, and the physical interpretation of the Orphic poem, on the other – are related. In other words, what keeps the eschatology and physics of the author together? Dirk Obbink, André Laks and Glenn Most have articulated this problem in three recent papers, each of which was published in 1997. All three authors point out convincingly that we cannot claim to have arrived at a satisfying interpretation of the text without proposing an answer to this question. Moreover, all three authors agree that the answer should be sought in the direction set out in Richard Seaford's pioneering study 'Immortality, Salvation and the Elements': that is, in a connection between the theory of elements and a doctrine of salvation.²¹

The trouble is that the surviving text of the papyrus offers very little direct help. First of all, the first columns are so heavily fragmented that it seems impossible

²¹ SEAFORD (1986). It is also true that a link between eschatology and cosmology might exist on a more general level, as Luc Brisson pointed it out to me. In a sense, all eschatological doctrines necessarily imply a cosmology, for if the soul survives the death of the individual, one has to know where it goes after it leaves the body. Therefore the understanding of the organization of the cosmos can be fundamental for the understanding and acceptance of a doctrine of the afterlife. Even though I think this is a valid general interpretation, I would go further and examine whether we can find a closer relationship between a particular cosmology and the particular eschatology to which it is connected. In other words, I should like to examine whether or not specific eschatological tenets can govern or require specific cosmological doctrines, and, conversely, whether or not a specific cosmological theory can explain the eschatology related to it.

to reconstruct the author's course of argument and particular tenets. Moreover, this part does not say anything – or almost nothing – about cosmology or physics. The second part of the text, on the other hand, speaks about physics but does not contain anything on eschatology.

We might have one clue, however. In column 4, in the middle of the eschatological part, the Derveni author adduces Heraclitus' dictum about the sun. From the evidence provided by the papyrus, it appears that what we knew up until now as two separate fragments of Heraclitus, DK B3 and B94, originally formed one statement. This is how it reads in the papyrus:

The sun ... according to nature is a human foot in width, not transgressing its boundaries. If ... oversteps, the Erinyes, the guardians of Dike, will find it out.

This quotation is obviously linked to both parts of the text: it speaks both about the importance of the size of the sun for the conservation of cosmic order, and about the Erinyes who also appear in other parts of the first six columns in a clearly eschatological context. However, the fragmentary state of the column makes it difficult to decide exactly what the Derveni author wanted to say about Heraclitus and whether he quoted Heraclitus approvingly or critically.

The Heraclitus quotation is, however, a further indication that the most obvious common denominator for all these texts and contexts is fire. Laks tentatively raises this possibility,²² whereas Glenn W. Most goes one step further and suggests a more specific hypothesis by bringing in the evidence of the gold leaves.²³ Most tries to connect the Derveni author's physics primarily with group B of the gold leaves, in which the central motif is the thirst of the dead person's soul and the quenching of this thirst. Although this line of interpretation seems promising at the start, it does not turn out to be convincing enough at the final stage. An immediate objection to Most's conjecture is that there is a basic discord between the use of physical elements in the two groups of evidence. The accent is on water in the Underworld situation described on the gold leaves, and, on the whole, there is no question of air and fire, whereas the Derveni author focuses on air and fire and is not at all interested in water. More important, Most's interpretation cannot account for the fact that for the Derveni author fire is not only, and not even primarily, destructive; indeed, once it is properly mastered by the divine Mind, it becomes the source of all generation.

In what follows I shall offer an alternative hypothesis just as tentative as the one proposed by Most. My suggestion is that we should expect a clue not from group B of the Thurii gold leaves as Most did, but from group A, and gold leaf C.²⁴ Gold leaf C was found in the Timpone Grande, inside a coffin of a cremated person, close to the head of the skeleton. This tablet is a tiny gold plate which was folded and into

²² LAKS (1997) 140; MOST (1997).

²³ MOST (1997) 131ff.

²⁴ I do not intend to enter into the debate whether or not the gold plates are 'Orphic'. The first editors and commentators were convinced that they were. Then came a long period of denial, culminating in the work of Zuntz. However, on the force of the new evidence from Hipponion, Pelinna and elsewhere, scholars nowadays tend to give justice to the first opinion.

which Gold leaf A4 was wrapped.²⁵ The text of C is notoriously difficult to read and interpret. Ten lines of writing are squeezed onto a tiny surface, while the wrinkles caused by folding of the plate further obscure the original inscription.²⁶ But what makes the decipherment practically hopeless is that the text seems to contain not only scribal errors (inversions of letters, reduplications, omissions) and a mixture of different dialectal forms, but also manifestly unintelligible letter combinations. It is far from clear whether these strings of letters stem from complete carelessness, or are abbreviations, cryptic codes, Greek transcriptions of words of another language, or magical abracadabra.²⁷

Even though longer intelligible syntactical units cannot be found on this gold leaf, certain words and shorter phrases are legible or can be reconstructed with a fair degree of confidence. Diels defined the resulting 'text' as an Orphic hymn to Demeter,²⁸ whereas Zuntz, more convincingly, tried to explain it as Kore's prayer to her mother Demeter.

To make reference easier, I present here Zuntz's tentative reading of the more or less intelligible parts (alternative readings and further, still less certain suggestions are indicated by a pair of solidi):²⁹

1. Πρωτογονιδ) την / Γην / ... Γαλ / τακ / ματρι / εφ~~α~~
Κυβελεια korra ... Δημητρος ήτ-
2. -ταται ... Ζευ / ιατηρ / πατηρ / τυ αερ ... Ηλιε πυρ δη παντ
αστη / παντας την / ... εινικαι.
3. (ς)ηδε τυχαι τ' εφανης / τε Φανης / παμμηστ~~α~~ρι Μοιραι(ς) ...
κυ κλυτε / (α)παιτη) την / ςηκ / δαιμον ευχη(ς) / δ ευχηκ /
4. πατερα) ... παντ' αδαμαστα παντ(η) / παντα δαμακς τα παντ' /
...
-ντα / -νταις / ... -οντα δε παντ' εμοι / (ε)λαβοιτα) / /
ελακ~~υ~~βροντα δε παντ' εκπ' φοιβης / ... τλητεα / παλιν
5. τη μη αερι πυρ ... ματερ εστι κοι / λυες τι κοι / επιτα /
επιτατο / / επιτατονη κιν νηστιν νυξιν η μεθ ημεραν ...
6. εννημαρ / / επιτημαρ / ... νηστιας ... Ζευ / Ολκμ~~υ~~π~~ι~~ε / και
πανοπτα Ακλιε αιε διε ... ματερ εμας επ-
7. ακλουσον ... ευχας / ακτακτα / πυρας ... πεδιω / χι αμα τι / εμαν
/ καλη / δ ιερα / διερα / ευδακμ~~υ~~κ~~υ~~νοι / δαμνα /
8. ςτακτηρ ιερα / ςτακτηρι εραμαι / Δημητερ πυρ Ζευ και η
χθονια ... / μνητρος / ...
9. ... ες φρενα ματρι ...
10. ... ες τον αερ ... ες φρενα ματρι

²⁵ For the description of the excavation and the archaeological details, see ZUNTZ (1971) 287ff., esp. 290.

²⁶ On the paleographical difficulties, see ZUNTZ (1971) 345.

²⁷ 'A text more corrupt than this will not easily be found...' ZUNTZ (1971) 345.

²⁸ DIELS (1902). It should be noted that Diels' textual conjectures were severely criticized by all subsequent commentators, cf., e.g., KERN (1922) *ad loc.*

²⁹ For the transcript and critical apparatus, see ZUNTZ (1971) pp. 346–348. Cf. also the alternative reconstruction, short discussion and facsimile (drawn by M. PUCCETTI) in OF 47.

Obviously, I do not pretend to understand much of this. Nonetheless, I still think that it shows undeniable points of contact with the Derveni text. To begin with, no matter how incomprehensible this text is, it undoubtedly connects divinities with physical elements and parts of the cosmos. Moreover, the divinities and elements mentioned on this gold leaf, and possibly the correspondences established between them, fit surprisingly well with what we find in the Derveni papyrus. For convenience's sake, I have underlined the most relevant parts of the text. Diels has suggested that in the first line $\Delta\eta\mu\acute{\eta}\tau\eta\rho$ is identified with $\Gamma\tilde{\eta}$ and $\mu\acute{\eta}\tau\eta\rho$. This identification explicitly turns up in the Derveni papyrus (col. 22. 7–11). Then line 2, analyzed in detail by Zuntz, is particularly interesting from our point of view. Zuntz suggests first that Zeus may here be identified with air – a momentous detail for us. Furthermore there is the connection between the sun (or Helios) and fire – true, not very surprising in itself. Then in the next line we find a reference to Moira, and the rare epithet $\pi\alpha\mu\mu\acute{\eta}\sigma\tau\omega\rho$ ‘who devises all’. In the Derveni poem, the cognate verb $\acute{\epsilon}\mu\acute{\eta}\sigma\tau\omicron$ is used to describe Zeus’ creative power.³⁰ The Derveni author, moreover, presents an interesting line of argument about Moira being the wisdom of Zeus, ordaining ‘how the things that are and the things that come to be and the things that going to be must come to be and be and cease.’³¹ A further portentous observation is that of all the elements air (perhaps equated with Zeus) and fire, mainly in the form of the sun,³² seem to play a major role, while earth appears in a secondary place, and water does not turn up at all. It may be sheer coincidence, but this is exactly the distribution we have found in the papyrus.

The fact that most of the intelligible words of this gold tablet are indeed catchwords in the Derveni text (air, fire, sun, Zeus, Demeter, Ge, mother, Moira) makes it at least defensible to evoke the evidence of the gold plates in the interpretation of the papyrus. Now, as I have already mentioned, the folded Gold leaf A4 was wrapped in C. This arrangement secures that C and A4 were somehow related in the ritual; and, as has been shown by Zuntz, A4 belongs to the same family as A1, A2, and A3.³³

The most complete and least corrupt of group A is A1,³⁴ found in the Timpone Piccolo of Thurii.³⁵ Most important for us is the central line 4. In line four the speaker says that his death was by lightning and caused by Moira. (*ἀλλά με μοῖρ*

³⁰ Cf. col. 23. 4 and col. 25.

³¹ Col. 19. 4–7: *Μοῖραν, ὃ ἐπικλῶσαι / λέγοντες τοῦ Διὸς τῇ φρόνησιν ἐπικυρώσαι / λέγουσιν τὰ ἔόντα καὶ τὰ γινόμενα καὶ τὰ μέλλοντα, / ὅπως χρῆ γενέσθαι τε καὶ εἶναι καὶ παύεσθαι*. Cf. also col. 18. 2ff.

³² I wonder if the last letters in the sequence *Ηλιε πυρ δη παντ' αστη* is not connected to *αστηρ*. Diels adduces Parmenides B 1.3.

³³ Incidentally, the two Thessalian gold leaves found in a tomb in 1985 on the site of ancient Pellina are the most closely related to this group. This is important as far as the Thessalian leaves contain a clear reference to the Orphic myth of the rending of Dionysus.

³⁴ For a critical discussion of the text, with the differences compared to the other tablets of the same group, see ZUNTZ (1971) 299–327.

³⁵ GRAF (1991) 96f. argues convincingly that the Pelinna and Hipponion plates bridge the gap between Zuntz's A and B groups, showing that, in fact, all these tablets are closely connected and must have belonged to the same religious movement. It has to be noted that the gold plates from other locations still do not parallel or explain the text on Tablet C.

ἐδάμασσε καὶ ἀστεροβλήτα κεραυνῶ). We have just seen that Moira has an eminent role in the text of Gold leaf C, where her name appears close to different forms of the verb δαμάω, and also in the Derveni papyrus. But for us, another momentous point is the reference to lightning. There has been some discussion in the literature whether or not all three buried in the Timone Piccolo with a similar text by them actually died by lightning.³⁶ Of course, the question is quite impossible to answer definitely; and I agree with those like Peter Kingsley who say that the main interest of this body of evidence does not lie in this matter of fact.³⁷ It pertains rather to the more general theme of heroization – or even deification – by lightning and fire.

This time Zeus' thunderbolt, not as a means of heroization, but as a tool of punishment, turns up at a crucial point in the Orphic mythological narratives, where Zeus strikes down with his thunderbolt the Titans who have just killed, dismembered and devoured the young Dionysus. It is highly likely that the Orphic poem commented on in the Derveni papyrus contained this episode, but, regrettably, the text is cut off at the preceding stage of the narrative.

Even more interesting for us is that Zeus' thunderbolt, as a means of heroization, is sometimes related to the funeral pyre. Heracles' death has a prominent place in this tradition. As soon as Heracles' pyre on mount Oeta was lit a thunderstorm came and the hero was lifted into heaven by lightning.³⁸ The fire of the thunderbolt and that of the pyre have thus become symbolically connected. The pyre and the thunderbolt of Zeus are connected also in the story of Asclepius. Apollo falls in love with the Thessalian Coronis. But the girl, already pregnant with the child of Apollo, sleeps with a mortal man. Artemis punishes the unfaithful girl with death. When the girl is already on the funeral pyre, Apollo decides to save the unborn baby, Asclepius. The centaur Chiron brings up the child and teaches him the art of medicine. But Asclepius transgresses the limits of his art, and not only heals the sick but also raises the dead. For this excess Zeus strikes him with the thunderbolt. Thus Asclepius, who was born on a funeral pyre, receives divine punishment and at the same time heroization by Zeus' thunderbolt. Fire is the element of birth, death and heroic rebirth, the element which sets the limits of mortal life.

In the figure and story of Asclepius, I maintain, we find together numerous elements that are relevant to the Derveni papyrus and its author. Asclepius, like Orpheus, is a Thessalian hero. Apollo has a distinguished role both in the cult of Asclepius and the Thessalian cult of Orpheus. Like the figure of Orpheus, the figure of Asclepius combines chthonic elements with the cult of the Sun. Moreover, the art of Asclepius corresponds in many ways to that of an Orphic initiation-priest, someone like the Derveni author. It brings together healing – primarily magical healing in the Thessalian version of Asclepius – with oracles, mainly dream oracles. In col. 5, the Derveni author makes clear that he was interested also in the interpretation of dreams.

³⁶ J. Harrison maintained that they did not, and that the reference is purely mythical (HARRISON [1922] 587), whereas Zuntz finds it more likely that the people buried in this tumulus were actually struck by thunderbolts, and thereby 'sanctified' (ZUNTZ [1971] 316).

³⁷ KINGSLEY (1995) 257f.

³⁸ See, e.g., Diodorus Siculus 4. 38. 4; Lucian, *Hermotimus* 7, Apoll. 2. 7. 7 with further references in FRASER'S note *ad loc.* in the Loeb edition of the *Bibliotheca*.

On the other hand, he uses certain words (e.g., *θάλαμικ*) that stem from medical terminology. It is perhaps also worth mentioning that the Thessalian gold leaves, related to the ones from Thurii, were found very close to the ancient Trikka, the mythical birthplace and a major cult centre of Asclepius.³⁹

Another interesting piece of evidence comes from Plato. At the end of the final book of the *Republic*, Socrates relates the story of the Pamphylian Er. Conspicuously, the account of the brave Er, chosen by the gods to be their messenger, brings together some of the central themes of the papyrus: we get not only the description of the journey and the lottery of souls – that is a colourful presentation of a retributive eschatology that props up the ethical tenets of Plato – and a detailed topology of the Underworld to give the settings for the story, but also a cosmological account.⁴⁰ Now it is generally agreed that Plato incorporated many Orphico-Pythagorean elements in the story of Er. And, quite notably, Er, whom everybody thought to be dead, was revived to transmit the divine message by disclosing the fate of the soul and the major motive forces that govern the cosmos *on the pyre* (*ἐπὶ τῇ πυρᾷ κείμενος ἀνεβίω Rep. 614b7*).

Thus far we have seen that the thunderbolt and the pyre, often connected with each other, have a central role both in the eschatology of the individual souls on the gold leaves of group A, in the Orphic mythological narrative about Dionysus and the Titans, in the myth of Heracles and in the Thessalian cult of Asclepius, and the myth of Er, which probably shows a strong Orphic influence. At a more general level, not specific either to the eschatology of the gold leaves or to the Orphic narrative, the thunderbolt is the means by which Zeus maintains and reaffirms divine justice. The connection between these elements may or may not have been explicit in the minds or writings of those involved.⁴¹

The only author mentioned by name in the extant text of the Derveni papyrus other than Orpheus is Heraclitus. The importance of fire in the philosophy of Heraclitus needs no special pleading. But, more specifically, fire seems to have an eschatological role also for Heraclitus. In this respect, the most explicit is perhaps DK B66, quoted by Hippolytus of Rome: ‘Fire, he [Heraclitus] says, when it comes upon, will judge and convict all things.’ (*πάντα γὰρ ... τὸ πῦρ ἐπελθὼν κρινεῖ καὶ καταλήψεται*). The parallel use of *καταλαμβάνω* in B28 ‘Dike will convict the fabricators of lies and those who bear witness to them.’ (*Δίκη καταλήψεται ψευδῶν*

³⁹ It is perhaps also worth mentioning that the same kind of preliminary sacrifice consisting of wineless libations and sacrificial cakes was offered to Asclepius as the ones offered to the Eumenides as described in col. 6. Cf. HENRICHS (1984) 258.

⁴⁰ Even though also this part of the account is expressed in mythical terms (especially because of its reference to the four goddesses, Ananke, Lachesis, Clotho, and Athropos), it gives the first approximation of a much more sophisticated explanatory model for the heavenly motions.

⁴¹ As, e.g., KIRK–RAVEN–SCHOFIELD (1983) 30 suggest, the statement of the dead person ‘I am the son of Earth and starry Sky’ on the Hipponion gold plate can be taken as a reference to the Titanic origin of man. This evidence might also reinforce the conviction of the early editors of the Thurii gold plates that the dead man’s claim to be of the gods’ race, followed by the statement about death by lightning, is to be connected with the Orphic anthropogony, or at least with the story of the Titans devouring Dionysus.

τέκτονας καὶ μάρτυρας) reinforces the feeling that divine justice is involved here.⁴² It is noteworthy for our discussion that B66 is immediately followed by B64 in Hippolytus' text: 'The thunderbolt steers all things' (τὰ δὲ πάντα οἰακίζει κεραυνός). In this fragment, the thunderbolt offers an easy mediation between the Heraclitean cosmic fire and Zeus, the traditional representation of the supreme divine power.⁴³

Fire and divine justice, from which there is no escape, return in a somewhat more cryptic manner in B16: 'How could one escape the notice of that which never sets?' (τὸ μὴ δύνόν ποτε πῶς ἄν τις λάθῃ). This fragment is yet again a corrective re-appropriation of a traditional concept, this time that of ἥλιος πανόπτης, the 'sun which sees all'. The meaning of this fragment, as generally agreed by commentators, is well captured in Plato's *Cratylus* in the passage where the etymology of the word δίκαιον, 'just', is discussed. The sun in itself cannot fulfill the role of 'the eye of Zeus' or 'the eye of Justice' because it sets every night – but the cosmic divine fire, the sun that never sets, can easily take up this function.⁴⁴ Thus, the cosmic fire appears here in the role of the supreme cosmic watchman, assuming the role traditionally ascribed to the sun.⁴⁵ The general image we get from all these fragments is that, for Heraclitus, cosmic and eschatological guidance, justice, and surveillance are closely related, or rather identical, functions of the supreme divine power that is fire.⁴⁶

If I interpret him right, the Derveni author would agree with much of this – except the very last word: fire. First and foremost, he would certainly concur with Heraclitus on the point that cosmic justice and eschatology are just two facets of the same divine order. Besides, he would also assent to the view that fire's role is central both in cosmology and eschatology. Yet he would not concede that the supreme

⁴² Cf. MARCOVICH *ad loc.*

⁴³ B 11 (πᾶν (γάρ) ἐρπετὸν πληγῇ νέμεται) probably also belongs in this context. As DK suggest, θεοῦ or Διός is to be understood with πληγῇ, and the whole concept evidently alludes to Zeus' thunderbolt (cf., e.g., Hes. *Thg.* 853ff., adduced by MARCOVICH *ad loc.*).

⁴⁴ Plato *Crat.* 413 b: [reflecting on the former hypothesis that the δίκαιον is the sun] ... καὶ ἐρωτᾷ εἰ οὐδὲν δίκαιον οἶμαι εἶναι ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐπειδὴν ὁ ἥλιος δύνῃ λιπαροῦντος οὐδ' ἐμοῦ ὅ τι αὐτὸ ἐκείνος λέγει αὐτό, τὸ πῦρ φησιν

⁴⁵ It is worth noting that the same concept also appears on the Tablet C (cf. πανόπτα Ἀκλίε in line 6), where the physical interpretation of the sun as fire is almost certain (cf., e.g., *Ἥλιε πῦρ* in line 2, with Zuntz' comments *ad loc.*).

⁴⁶ Another notable point of contact is that the interrelation between cosmology and eschatology is *dynamic* both in Heraclitus and the Derveni papyrus. By this I mean that the most important psychic and eschatological processes receive a physical interpretation (e.g., that the betterment of the soul can be described as becoming more fiery, or joining the cosmic fire etc.), and thus such changes modify also the physical set up of the cosmos. This is also strongly related to the point that the cosmic divine principle is identified with one of the physical elements. The dynamic interplay between cosmology and eschatology is also characteristic of Empedocles, as has become more evident than ever with the publication of the Strasbourg papyrus (MARTIN-PRIMAVESI [1999]): the history of the physical constitution of the cosmos and the history of the souls are not independent processes. This conception can be contrasted with those accounts where the relationship between cosmology and eschatology is *static*. This is what we find for example in Plato's great eschatological myths. In these texts, the quite detailed cosmological description is an unalienable part of the narrative, but the cosmological account is static, and the cosmic topography provides only the stage on which the drama of the souls can take place. This point would however need a more thorough analysis, which I cannot undertake here. For some important remarks on this question, see NAGY A. (2000) 91–100.

divine power is fire. True, it is the force of fire whose effect we can immediately perceive in the workings of the sun, the thunderbolt, or the pyre. But fire is neither divine, nor intelligent in itself: it is not more than a brute force. It is only the apparatus with the help of which the cosmic divinity communicates its will to the world. *Pace* Heraclitus, not the thunderbolt steers the world, but Zeus, that is, air, and fire is but a tool in his hand.

As a matter of fact, the Derveni author could point out that in the sentence he quotes in col. 4, Heraclitus apparently *contradicts* his own principal doctrine. For is not the sun the most magnificent cosmic manifestation and concentration of fire? And if the fire of the sun is intelligent and divine in itself, as Heraclitus maintains, then why should it be under the surveillance of Dike and the Erinyes? Is it not true that Dike is, or is a function of, the cosmic intelligence? Conversely, if the sun, this huge mass of fire, fundamental to cosmic order and life, needs some coercive force to ensure that it keeps to its proper measure, then fire cannot be the supreme cosmic intelligence.⁴⁷ By referring to Heraclitus, the Derveni author can insist on the cosmological and eschatological importance of fire; whereas by quoting B3+B94 he can point out that even Heraclitus is obliged to admit that the fire concentrated in the sun is *not* the ultimate intelligent principle.

On this basis, let me offer a tentative free paraphrase of the author's main tenet. Fire – the lightning in a thunderstorm, the burning flames of the pyre, or the fire of Hades – can appear terrifying; but is in fact nothing to be feared.⁴⁸ True, fire is an immense and possibly destructive power, yet it does not act on its own. On the contrary, it is the principal means through which divine justice and intervention can manifest themselves, both at the cosmic level and at the level of the individual soul. Fire is instrumental: its tremendous force is under the control of the supreme divine intelligence, be it called air or Zeus. Just look at the heavenly bodies. That vast amount of fire concentrated in them could, in principle, destroy everything. But once fire is mastered and fashioned in a proper form by the cosmic intelligence, it becomes the source of all becoming. For fire is nothing but the device with the help of which the god, the intelligent divine air, keeps justice and governs the world. Thus, they who have no reason to be afraid of divine retribution should not fear fire either. The fire of the pyre, or that of the thunderbolt, destroys the corpse, but the soul is airy⁴⁹

⁴⁷ These questions, which I am putting in the mouth of the author, indicate genuine problems – irrespective from the Derveni text – since the (Fire-Logos)-Dike-Erinyes-sun relationship is certainly problematic. Dike, as universal Justice, must have a close relationship to the Logos and the ordering fire (cf., e.g., KAHN [1979] 273). SCHÖNBECK (1998) 103ff. lists important questions concerning the sun (HAI OC)-Erinyes relationship. I agree with Schönbeck that the role the Erinyes play in connection with the sun/Helios in the Heraclitus fragment depends on the reading and interpretation of the conditional participle in line 8 of column 4.

⁴⁸ As commonly agreed, the main aim of mysteries was to provide relief from some kind of anxiety connected with eschatology; see, e.g., BURKERT (1987) 21ff.

⁴⁹ That the individual soul is airy is not stated in the papyrus. But in all those systems where we get a physical description of the cosmic divine intellect, the individual soul, or at least the most valuable, rational or divine part of it shares in the basic physical nature of the cosmic divinity. This pattern is certainly present in the respective systems of those philosophers who had the most impact on the Derveni author's doctrines: Anaxagoras, Diogenes of Apollonia and Heraclitus. Moreover, Aristotle explicitly states that according to the Orphic *logoi* the soul is something that we breathe in (*De An.* 410b27ff:

and fire has no power over it. Moreover, in so far as the individual soul is assimilated to the cosmic intelligence, fire becomes its helper: by destroying something inferior – the corpse – it promotes the birth of something superior.⁵⁰ The ultimate message, therefore, is the proper understanding of the relationship between air and fire; and the main clue is the exegesis of the verse that the Derveni author quotes from the Orphic poem at a central moment of his commentary:

Ζεὺς βασιλεύς, Ζεὺς δ' ἀρχὸς ἀπαντων ἀργικέραυτος
 'Zeus the king, Zeus who rules all with the bright bolt'.

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τοῦτο δὲ πέποιθε καὶ ὁ ἐν τοῖς Ὀρφικοῖς καλουμένοις ἔπει λόγος· φησὶ γὰρ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐκ τοῦ ὄλου εἰσιέναι ἀναπνεόντων, φερομένην ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνέμων κτλ.)

⁵⁰ The first lines of col. 4, preceding the Heraclitus quotation, seem to express something in this vein: something/someone does something positive rather than doing harm (ἰδοῦναι / μᾶλλον ἢ] εἰνε-ται[). I wonder if in ὁ κείμ[...], μετ[αθ] there could be a reference to the corpse, cf. LSJ sv. κείμαι I. 4–5.

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