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When I walked the dark road of Hades: Orphic katabasis and the katabasis of Orpheus

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“WHEN I WALKED THE DARK ROAD OF HADES”: Orphic *katábasis* and the *katábasis* of Orpheus

And I have told you all I saw and learned when
at Taenarum I walked the dark road of Hades
trusting my cithara, for love of my wife...¹

The opening of the *Orphic Argonautica* provides a list of all the previous themes of Orphic poetry, including this reference to Orpheus' most famous exploit, his *katábasis* into Hades in search of his wife. This line implies that, among the Orphic literature familiar to the audiences of this 5th century CE poem, was an Orphic *Katábasis*, and other lists of Orphica do indeed include a Εἰς Ἄιδου κατὰβασις. What kind of *katábasis* should we imagine from this reference in the late *Orphic Argonautica*? If the Orphicist, the poet from the 5th century CE who composed the *Argonautica* and attributed it to Orpheus, expected his audience to be familiar with a previous descent in Hades, what might that story have been?

As the many different studies of *katabáseis* in this volume show, not all descents to the Underworld are the same; they differ in genre, in tone, in outlook, as well as in the details of who is undertaking the journey and how the Underworld appears. Nor does the journey to the other world always have the same meaning, but the messages about the relation of life and death, of the living to the dead, and of the world of the living to the world of the dead all vary with the particular telling of the tale². Odysseus' journey in the *Odyssey* reinforces the importance of epic glory triumphing even over death, while Er's experience in Plato's *Republic* illustrates the necessity of living a philosophic lifestyle. There are many motivations for a *katábasis*, many kinds of *katábasis*.

1. *Orphic Argonautica*, 41-43 (OF 1018vB = OT 224K): Ἄλλα δέ σοι κατέλεξ' ἄπερ εἴσιδον ἠδ' ἐνόησα, / Ταίναρον ἦνικ' ἔβην σκοτίνῃ ὁδῶν, Ἄιδος εἴσω, / ἡμετέρη πίσυνοσ κιθάρη δι' ἔρωτ' ἄλόχοιο.

2. Cp. my study in R. G. EDMONDS III (2004), exploring the different meanings of the journey to the Underworld in Plato, Aristophanes, and the 'Orphic' gold tablets.

Scholars in the 20th century have generally assumed several things about this poem, that it was an autobiographical account of Orpheus' own *katábasis* and that its primary purpose was to convey eschatological doctrine, specifically about the necessity of Orphic rituals for a happy afterlife existence. F. Graf claims, "It must have been an autobiographical account of a voyage into the afterlife to bring back Eurydice", while R. Parker stresses the essentially eschatological nature of the poem:

Orphic poetry can almost be defined as eschatological poetry, and it was in such poems perhaps that 'persuasive' accounts of the afterlife – accounts designed, unlike that in *Odyssey* XI, to influence the hearer's behaviour in the here and now – were powerfully presented for the first time³.

Although few would now agree with early 20th century scholars such as A. Dieterich that such an Orphic *katábasis* predated Homer, the assumption lingers that this *katábasis* must somehow have been an early one that influenced the later forms of *katábasis* myths.

I argue to the contrary that none of these assumptions are supported by the evidence but that they each come out of other mistaken premises in recent scholarship. There was no single and simple poem narrated by Orpheus that described his descent to provide the foundations of Orphic eschatological doctrines, but rather a variety of poems by different authors embodying different ideas and even telling different tales.

I would begin by differentiating a *katábasis* of Orpheus, that is, a poem about the descent into the Underworld by the character Orpheus, from an Orphic *katábasis*, that is, a poem about a descent into the Underworld attributed to the authorship of Orpheus. None of the evidence for a *katábasis* of Orpheus or an Orphic *katábasis* shows traces of a first person narrative, nor does any ancient evidence use Orpheus' journey to the Underworld as the source of authority for eschatological ideas. Indeed, despite scholars' assumption that an Orphic *katábasis* provided a model for other *katabáseis*, the ancient sources make remarkably little mention of its influence. This is not merely a simple argument from silence – always a shaky foundation given the vast amount of material lost from antiquity. Rather, in several places where we might expect mention of an Orphic *katábasis*, that mention is noticeably absent. When Plutarch, an author well acquainted with a variety of Orphic literature lost to us, discusses poets who describe the terrors of the Underworld in his treatise on how to moderate the dangers of young people reading poetry, he does not mention Orpheus among the poets who describe the Underworld. Homer, whose *Odyssey* Underworld is clearly the

3. R. PARKER (1995), p. 500; F. GRAF (*BNP*); cp. M. L. WEST (1983, p. 12): "this was probably a poem in autobiographical form".

most influential, is the first to be mentioned, but Plutarch also mentions Pindar and Sophocles as providing influential images of the Underworld⁴. Nothing in the extant works of either of these poets appears to describe the terrors of the afterlife, but Plutarch lists them rather than Orpheus. Likewise, when Pausanias is discussing the Underworld scene painted by Polygnotus, he compares various well known Underworld accounts on which Polygnotus might have drawn⁵. Passing over Orpheus, he refers to Homer and to the lost epics of the *Minyad* and the *Nostoi*.

This pattern of omission suggests that, rather than a single canonical and influential Orphic *katábasis* text, there were several poems attributed to Orpheus created by various Orphicists, all of which presented different ideas of the Underworld and none of which had a particularly strong influence on the later traditions. Moreover, despite the autobiographical reference in the *Orphic Argonautica*, the tales of the *katábasis* of Orpheus seeking his wife are, from the surviving evidence, different kinds of stories from the Orphic *katabáseis*. They are tales about the power of poetry and the ultimate finality of death rather than tales that use the journey to the Underworld for other purposes, such as providing a vision of the cosmic system that includes both the worlds of the living and the dead. In contrast to the Orphic *katábasis*, the *katábasis* of Orpheus remained a powerful story from our earliest witnesses in the classical period through the influential versions of Vergil and Ovid in the Roman period and on through the western traditions, from the medieval to the Renaissance to the early modern, the Romantics, and beyond.

Deconstructing the assumptions

If there is no evidence of an early influential first person narrative by Orpheus with eschatological significance, why should scholars so routinely assume it? It is worth taking apart the assumptions underlying each of the aspects – the early date, the doctrinal nature, and the autobiographical format – to see the problems with each. The assumption of an early date is

4. Plut., *Quom. adul.*, 17b7-c9: Πάλιν αἱ περὶ τὰς νεκρίας τερατουργίαι καὶ διαθέσεις ὀνόμασι φοβεροῖς ἐνδημιουργοῦσαι φάσματα καὶ εἰδωλα ποταμῶν φλεγόμενων καὶ τόπων ἀγρίων καὶ κολασμάτων σκυθρωπῶν οὐ πάνυ πολλοὺς διαλανθάνουσιν ὅτι τὸ μυθῶδες αὐτοῖς πολὺ καὶ τὸ ψεῦδος ὥσπερ τροφαῖς τὸ φαρμακῶδες ἐγκέκραται. Καὶ οὐθ' Ὅμηρος οὔτε Πίνδαρος οὔτε Σοφοκλῆς πεπεισμένοι ταῦτ' ἔχειν οὕτως ἔγραψαν· “ἔνθεν τὸν ἄπειρον ἐρεῦγονται σκότον / βληχροὶ δνοφερᾶς νυκτὸς ποταμοί,” καὶ “πᾶρ δ' ἴσαν Ὀκεανοῦ τε ῥοαῖς καὶ Λευκάδα πέτρην”, καὶ “στενωπὸς Ἄϊδου καὶ παλιρροία βυθοῦ”.

5. Paus., X, 28, 7: Ἡ δὲ Ὀμήρου ποιήσις ἐς Ὀδυσσεά καὶ ἡ Μινυάς τε καλουμένη καὶ οἱ Νόστοι – μνήμη γάρ ἔν ἐν ταύταις καὶ Ἄϊδου καὶ τῶν ἐκεῖ δειμάτων ἐστὶν – ἴσασιν οὐδένα Εὐρύνομον δαίμονα.

grounded in the ancient idea of the antiquity of Orpheus, mingled with the modern idea of the priority of primitive ritual to sophisticated literature. The idea that Orphic poetry must relate to eschatological doctrines and rituals relies on the idea that Orphism can be defined by its doctrines and that anything Orphic must therefore include these doctrines. The assumption that the poem must be autobiographical rests on the plausible hypothesis that a first person narrative would carry more authority, but it neglects the way the performance of such poems would affect the impact of the narration.

The idea that Orpheus is the oldest of the poets was, as I have argued elsewhere, always an important part of the idea of the Orphic in the Greco-Roman tradition ⁶. As an Argonaut, Orpheus predates the Trojan War by a few generations, and the antiquity of Orpheus made him a useful pseudonym for anyone wishing to claim authority that trumped that of Homer or later poets ⁷. Diodorus Siculus, indeed, claims that Homer took his ideas about the afterlife from Orpheus, who borrowed imagery from the Egyptians ⁸. Even if this antiquity was doubted as early as Herodotus, it remained a significant factor much later in the tradition. The debate about the antiquity of Orpheus played a role in the disputes between the Pergamene and Alexandrian editors over the authentic texts of Homer. Aristarchus and the Alexandrians rejected lines that they took to be interpolations by Orpheus, who they thought lived later than Homer, while Krates and his Pergamene school seem to have accepted Orpheus' antiquity, and thus any lines that appeared also in Orphic poems were taken as borrowings by Homer ⁹. In modern scholarship, the debates continued, but, lacking the actual Orphic poems the ancients had, scholars such as A. Dieterich and E. Norden used a hypothetical Orphic poem as a sort of black box to which they could trace elements in later texts that escaped their attempts at scientific *Quellenforschung*. Things that did not appear in extant texts, especially peculiar elements such as ideas about the afterlife, could be satisfactorily explained by the hypothesis of a canonical and influential Orphic poem ¹⁰.

6. Cp. R. G. EDMONDS III (2013, esp. p. 11-43), on the antiquity of Orpheus in the tradition.

7. This antiquity was especially significant for the Neoplatonists responding to Christian attacks on the Hellenic tradition, cp. R. G. EDMONDS III (2013), p. 27-43.

8. "And after Orpheus had introduced this notion among the Greeks, Homer followed it when he wrote" (Diod. Sic., I, 96, 6: τοῦ δ' Ὀρφέως τοῦτο καταδείξαντος παρὰ τοῖς Ἕλλησι τὸν Ὅμηρον ἀκολούθως τούτῳ θεῖναι κατὰ τὴν ποίησιν).

9. G. NAGY (2001), p. 8: *Selon le modèle de la succession Orphée-Homère, telle que l'acceptait l'école pergaménienne de Cratès, le texte de l'Homerus auctus inclut des éléments orphiques. Selon le modèle de la succession Homère-Orphée, telle que l'acceptait l'école alexandrine d'Aristarque, le texte d'Homère implique le rejet des éléments orphiques.*

Another factor in postulating the early date of the Orphic *katábasis* is the idea that a myth linked directly to ritual represents a more primitive stage of development than a literary version. M. L. West postulates such a development from shamanistic poems or “poems composed in and for religious circles whose rituals contained elements of shamanistic origin” to later poetry without the ritual context¹¹. This association of the *katábasis* with ritual is taken for granted, despite the lack of evidence, by many other scholars as well, and the standard encyclopedia claims, “The *katábasis* poems served especially the ‘Orphic’ Dionysus mysteries”. The function of the *katábasis* myth in such mystery rituals is presumed to be doctrinal, the tale of the quest for Eurydice is “enriched with a wealth of knowledge about the afterlife”¹². Despite other evidence for a wider circulation and performance of Orphic poems, the audience is assumed to be exclusively the religious circles who perform the rituals, the Orphic believers whose “behaviour in the here and now”, as R. Parker puts it, was influenced by the ideas of after-life reward and punishment depicted in the myth. “To be of use”, Parker claims, “to a working Orpheotelest busy with initiations and expiations, a text obviously had to be of a particular type”¹³. But there is no reason to suppose that busy Orpheotelests were the only or even the primary performers of Orphic texts. R. P. Martin has indeed shown that the Orphic poems were probably performed in public rhapsodic contexts, and the pattern of their citation in Plato and other early authors indicates that ritual contexts could not have been the only performance context for the *Orphica*¹⁴. The

10. Cp. E. NORDEN (1927), p. 268, *ad* 548 & f. 1: *Hierdurch ist das Alter der von Vergil befolgten Vorlage gesichert. Da ferner Motive der eleusinischen Mysterien in die orphischen übernommen wurden, so liegt wenigstens die Möglichkeit vor, daß die von Vergil nachweislich (s. Einleitung S. 5, 2) stark benutzte orphische katábasis auch hier seine Quelle gewesen ist.*

11. M. L. WEST (1983), p. 7: “The initial stage in the development of an Orphic literature was, I presume, the attribution to Orpheus, as the great ‘shaman’ of the past, of poems of shamanistic character (describing journeys to Hades, etc.), or of poems composed in and for religious circles whose rituals contained elements of shamanistic origin. This must have begun before the rationalization of Orpheus had proceeded so far as to efface his shamanistic associations. The next stage was to use his name more generally for poems which revealed the truth about such matters as the nature and destiny of the soul, or the sacred history of the gods”.

12. F. GRAF (*BNP*), “*Katábasis*”.

13. R. PARKER (1995), p. 500, 486.

14. Cp. R. P. MARTIN (2001), who cites Plato, *Ion*, 533b-c, to show that the idea of rhapsodes performing (and explaining) Orpheus’ poetry could pass without further comment for a Classical Athenian audience. Apollonius of Tyana rebukes the Athenians for dancing lewd dances to the poems of Orpheus performed at the Dionysia (*Phil., Vit. Ap.*, IV, 21), which suggests that this very public festival could be an occasion for the performance of Orphic poems. Apollonius does not criticize the Athenians for performing the Orphic poems outside of a secret ritual, but rather for dressing up in effeminate

relation of any mythic telling to the performance of ritual is, in any case, never as straightforward in Greek religion as the (often used but always implicit) model of the Christian Eucharist and Last Supper story would suggest, and recent work has shown the variety of ways the performance of myth and ritual might interrelate¹⁵. Nor can we any longer seriously entertain the idea, so dear to earlier myth-ritual scholars, of an evolution from myth closely linked to ritual to literary myth detached from ritual.

The idea that an Orphic *katábasis* must take the form of an autobiographical *katábasis* of Orpheus has a natural intuitive appeal, and scholars have pointed to the impact that a first person narration would have, providing authenticity and authority, but this idea is unfortunately unsupported by the evidence¹⁶. None of the fragments of Orphic poetry that describe scenes of the Underworld includes first person narration, while the *Odyssey Nékyia*, by contrast, goes out of its way to emphasize the first person narration of Odysseus. Odysseus uses ἐγώ twenty-seven times in the course of the book – “and then I said”, “and then I saw” The emphasis is on what Odysseus himself saw in the Underworld; the vision is no mere secondhand hearsay¹⁷. Odysseus foregrounds his own poetic performance, here as elsewhere in the *Odyssey*, demonstrating his own ability to provide epic κλέος for the heroines and heroes whom he sees in the Underworld¹⁸.

It is worth noting that, with the exception of the famous opening seal line, “I sing for those of understanding, close the doors of your ears, ye pro-

garb and for other unmanly activities unbecoming to the victors of Salamis. It is worth noting that he goes on (IV, 22) to criticize them for blood sacrifice and meat-eating without any mention of Orpheus or Orphic ideas.

15. See, e.g., Barbara KOWALZIG (2007); cp. R. G. EDMONDS III (2013), p. 39-44. Even R. PARKER (1995, p. 486) admits: “First, it is not strictly demonstrable that all early Orphic poems were written for ritual use. [...] Second, even text that has a ritual function could have been, up to a point, quite diverse”.

16. As R. PARKER (1995, p. 500) postulates, “it was in such poems perhaps that ‘persuasive’ accounts of the afterlife – accounts designed, unlike that in *Odyssey* XI, to influence the hearer’s behaviour in the here and now – were powerfully presented for the first time”.

17. R. P. MARTIN (2001), p. 30: “With his repeated insistence on sight throughout the passage (XI, 235, 260, 266, 271, 281, 298, 306, 321, 326) Odysseus makes the claim of autopsy that the *Iliad* performer, in the splendid *recusatio* of *Iliad* II, 484ff., declines to make, and that the Hesiodic performer also foregoes. In other words, Odysseus trumps both strategies. He has been to Hades and back, and lived to tell. He has seen what others only hear about.”

18. Cp. R. P. MARTIN (2001), p. 26: “If we shift methodology, however, and follow a performance approach, the *Catalogue* style in Odysseus’ recounting of his *katábasis* becomes something rather new. Instead of a sign of textual untidiness, to be excused or mopped up, it is a key moment where the poet characterizes his own performance at the same time as he represents the ability and cunning of his internal narrator, Odysseus.”

fane”, first person narration is not characteristic of any of the other fragments of *Orphica*, either¹⁹. In this regard, however, the *Orphica* resemble other early epic, such as the *Homeric Hymns*, which introduce the first person of the poetic speaker only in the frame: the opening invocation and the final prayer. “I begin to sing of rich-haired Demeter, awful goddess ... [nearly five hundred lines of narrative without a first person address]. And now I will remember you and another song also”²⁰. Although there are brief bits of reported first person narrations, only in the *Odyssey* does such an extended one occur.

A poem narrated by Orpheus himself would not achieve any greater effect of personal authenticity, since the performer of a pseudonymous Orphic poem reciting Orpheus’ narration of his journey would be much the same as the performer of a Homeric poem reciting Odysseus’ narration of *his* journey. The special appeal of an autobiographical Orphic *katábasis* disappears when set alongside the Odyssean *katábasis* in performance contexts that are not confined to imagined secret ritual performances for a hypothetical group of Orphic faithfuls, such as public rhapsodic performances at the Athenian Dionysia²¹.

Reconstructing the evidence

If the extant evidence shows no signs of an early, autobiographical, and doctrinal account, then what does the evidence show? Traces remain of Orphic *katabáseis*, while much more survives of a *katábasis* of Orpheus recounted by various other authors. We fail to appreciate the power of the *katabáseis* of Orpheus if we view them merely as degenerate literary reworkings of the authentic ritually grounded myth, but we also run the risk of losing sight of the actual evidence for Orphic *katabáseis* if we presume such a hypothetical early canonical ritualistic version. The Orphic *katabáseis* seem to have been composed by various figures falling into that ill-defined category of Pre-Socratic thinkers, and we can recover only the barest hints

19. Plut., fr. 202 (Stob., *Flor.*, III, 1, 199 = *OF* 1B): ἀείσω ξυνετοῖσι· θύρας δ’ ἐπίθεσθε, βέβηλοι ...

20. *HhDem.*, 1 & 495: Δήμητρ’ ἠύκομον, σεμνήν θεόν, ἄρχομ’ ἀείδειν, [...] αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ καὶ σεῖο καὶ ἄλλης μνήσομ’ αἰοιδῆς.

21. Cp. Plato, *Ion*, 533b-c and *Phil.*, *Vit. Ap.*, IV, 21. R. P. MARTIN (2001, p. 29) still sees the Homeric poem responding to an innovation by the Orphic poem, but he provides no evidence for assuming that the Orphic poem would come first: “If the *Orphic Descent to Hades* circulated not just privately, but in public rhapsodic performance, the very existence of the *Nekuia* in Book 11 may well represent a response to this competitive pressure. The much-noticed incongruities that have led Analysts to see massive interpolation might then be the result of an *Odyssey* performer’s attempt to appropriate the latest popular performance topics in his community.”

of their contents, which seem to concern themselves with the nature of the cosmos. The *katabáseis* of Orpheus, on the other hand, recur throughout the literary tradition as ways to comment upon the power of poetry through the adventures of the archetypal poet. Orpheus, with his poetry, can charm even the powers of death, although death always does conquer in the end.

Much of the fragmentary and allusive evidence for an Orphic *katábasis* survives only in the ancient scholarly speculations about who the true authors of poems attributed to Orpheus really were. These lists appear in late sources, Clement of Alexandria and the Byzantine *Suda*, but at least some of the information seems to go back to one of the earliest studies of the *Orphica*, that of Epigenes in the 4th century, which suggests that all these authors fall into that elusive category of pre-Platonic Orphicists²². According to Clement, Epigenes attributes the *Descent into Hades* to a certain Kerkops the Pythagorean, but Clement also claims that the *Descent into Hades* is said to be by a certain Prodicus of Samos, while the *Suda* lists Herodicus of Perinthos as the author of the *katábasis*²³. Another author worth considering is Zopyrus of Heraclea, whom Clement calls the author of the *Krater*, a poem that may have described the Underworld, while he is also credited in the *Suda* list with the Orphic *Robe* and *Net*.

Since we have little but these names, what then can we conclude about the Orphic *katábasis* poems that are attributed to them? The evidence for these early *Orphica* suggests poems concerned not with the descent of Orpheus seeking Eurydice but rather a variety of other descents, by Heracles and Theseus, described in a poem by a pseudonymous Orpheus. The authors do not seem to have been concerned with providing doctrines about the afterlife or foundations for rituals; the little we can glean of their backgrounds suggests other interests, especially in the physical composition of the cosmos. It is worth inquiring into what little is known of each of these figures: Kerkops, Prodicus or Herodicus, and Zopyrus.

22. I. M. LINFORTH (1941, p. 114-119) identifies Epigenes as the follower of Socrates mentioned by Plato (*Ap.*, 33e; *Phd.*, 59b) and Xenophon (*Mem.*, 3, 12). For discussions of the role of Epigenes in the doxographic tradition, see J. MANSFELD (1990).

23. *Suda* s.v. Ὀρφεύς ο654 (OF 91B): ἔγραψε [...] Εἰς ἄδου κατάβασιν ταῦτα Ἡροδίκου τοῦ Περυνθίου· Πέπλον καὶ Δίκτυον· καὶ ταῦτα Ζωπύρου τοῦ Ἡρακλεώτου; Clem. Alex., *Strom.*, 1, 21, 131, 3-5 (OF 406B): Τὸν Κρατῆρα δὲ τὸν Ὀρφέως Ζωπύρου τοῦ Ἡρακλεώτου τὴν τε Εἰς Ἄιδου κατάβασιν Προδίκου τοῦ Σαμίου. Ἴων δὲ ὁ Χίος ἐν τοῖς Τριαγμοῖς καὶ Πυθαγόραν εἰς Ὀρφέα ἀνεγενεκεῖν τινα ἱστορεῖ. Ἐπιγένης δὲ ἐν τοῖς Περί τῆς εἰς Ὀρφέα ποιήσεως Κέρκωπος εἶναι λέγει τοῦ Πυθαγορείου τὴν Εἰς Ἄιδου κατάβασιν καὶ τὸν Ἡρόν λόγον.

Orphic *katabáseis*

About Kerkops little is known beyond the epithet he receives of 'Pythagorean', so he may be one of the 6th or 5th century Pythagorean Orphicists composing poems infused with Pythagorean ideas under the name of Orpheus²⁴. A certain Kerkops of Miletus, said to be a contemporary of Onomacritus, is at times credited with the lost epic *Aegimius*. While the more famous Hesiod is sometimes given as the author, few accept that attribution, even in antiquity²⁵. The subject of the *Aegimius* is uncertain, but it is likely to have narrated a *katabásis* by Heracles²⁶. One line from the *Aegimius*, describing Argos, the guardian of Io, as four-eyed and four-faced, shows up in the Neoplatonic commentator Hermias as a line from Orpheus that he interprets as allegorically referring to the *tetraktys*, the four-fold root of the decad²⁷. The line is quoted by a scholiast on Euripides *Phoinissae* as from the *Aegimius*, but Hermias no doubt found it recycled in the Neoplatonic *Orphic Rhapsodies*²⁸. N. Robertson argues that the references to Io and Ariadne in the extant fragments of the *Aegimius* suggest that they come from a catalog of women whom Heracles meets in the Underworld, while a reference to cool, sacred groves may be part of a description of the

24. The references to Kerkops as a the real author of an Orphic poem appear in Cic., *Nat. D.*, I, 107 as well as Clem. Al., *Strom.*, I, 21, 131, and the *Suda*. Another *Suda* entry (Ὀρφεύς 6658) credits the *katabásis* to Orpheus of Camarina, evidently drawing on the strand of ancient scholarship that postulated multiple Orpheuses as the way to reconcile the chronological problems in the myths of the character Orpheus and to explain the large and varied works attributed to him.

25. N. ROBERTSON (1980), p. 279: "In our sources the *Aegimius* is sometimes ascribed to Hesiod (Plut. *Thes.* 20, 1-2; Steph. Byz. s.v. Ἀβαντικός), sometimes to Cercops (Apld. Bibl. 2 [6] 1, 3, 3; 2 [23], 1, 5, 10; Ath. 13, 4, 557a), and sometimes is left anonymous (Phld. *De Piet.* p. 5 GOMPERZ; schol. Eur. *Phoen.* 1116; schol. Ap. *Rhod.*, Argon. 3, 587; 4, 816); Ath., 11, 109, 503d expressly notes the conflicting claims of Hesiod and Cercops".

26. King Aegimius, the father of Dorus, ancestor of the Dorians, was aided by Heracles and in turn sheltered Heracles' children, cementing an alliance that seems to have been used in stories of the Dorian invasion and the return of the Heraclids to the Peloponnesus. Cp. N. ROBERTSON (1980, p. 283), citing Ephorus, *FGrH*, 70 F 15; Str., IX, 4, 10, p. 427; Diod. Sic., IV, 37, 3-4; 58, 6; and Apoll., *Bibl.*, II [154- 155] 7, 7, 2-5; [176] 8, 3, 5.

27. *OF* 133 B = 76 K = Hermias 91, 5 Couvr. *ad* 246: Ῥίζα γὰρ πάντων τῶν ἀριθμῶν ἡ τετράς διὰ τὸ κατ' ἐπισύνθεσιν τῆς μονάδος ἄχρις αὐτῆς ἀποτελεῖσθαι τὸν δέκα, τὸν δὲ δέκα πάντα εἶναι τὸν ἀριθμὸν καὶ ὅλως τετρόμματον καὶ τετραπρόσωπον αὐτὸν ἡ θεολογία καλεῖ.

28. Scholia in *Euripidis Phoenissas*, hyp-scholium 1116, 4-17: Ὁ δὲ τὸν Αἰγίμου ποιήσας φησί "Καὶ οἱ ἐπίσκοπον Ἄργον ἴει κρατερόν τε μέγαν τε, τέτρασιν ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ὀρώμενον ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα, ἀκάματον δὲ οἱ ὥρσε θεᾶ μένος, οὐδέ οἱ ὕπνος πίπτει ἐπὶ βλεφάρους, φυλακὴν δ' ἔχεν ἔμπεδον αἰεῖ".

Underworld section reserved for the blessed dead²⁹. As he concludes, “in previous discussions of the *Aegimius* the fragments have proved utterly bewildering. In the context of Heracles’ *katábasis* they are not bewildering at all”³⁰.

Kerkops, then, was associated with a poem describing the descent of Heracles into Hades, as well as a poem entitled *Descent into Hades* under the pseudonym of Orpheus. Even if these two poems are not actually the same – and the evidence is insufficient to come to any conclusion in that regard – the juxtaposition of these attributions in the ancient sources raises the question of whether this *katábasis* attributed to Orpheus might indeed be a *katábasis* of Heracles. Other fragments and testimonies show that the ancient sources knew of at least one Orphic poem that described the *katábasis* of Heracles. Servius tells us explicitly that “it is said in Orpheus that, when Heracles descended to the Underworld, Charon was so terrified that he transported him at once, for which he was put in chains for a full year”³¹. The Orphic *katábasis* by Kerkops, then, whether or not it is to be identified with the *Aegimius* of Kerkops quoted by Hermias as by Orpheus, was a *katábasis* of Heracles, rather than of Orpheus.

Clement names Prodicus of Samos as the author of the *katábasis*, but nothing is known of this figure, except that he is probably not the more famous Prodicus of Ceos, the sophist known for his hair-splitting distinctions and rationalizing interpretations of mythology³². N. Robertson suggests that Prodicus of Samos may be the same as the Prodicus of Phocaea whom Pausanias credits with the lost epic poem, the *Minyad*³³. This identification, albeit speculative, has some intriguing potential, since the *Minyad*, whatever the full scope of the poem, undoubtedly included a *katábasis*. Pausanias indeed cites it in the context of his description of Polygnotus’ famous painting

29. Ath., *Deipn.*, XI, 109, 503c-d: Νίκανδρος δ’ ὁ Θυατειρηγὸς καλεῖσθαι φησι ψυκτῆρας καὶ τοὺς ἀλσώδεις καὶ συσκίους τόπους τοὺς τοῖς θεοῖς ἀνεμμένους, ἐν οἷς ἔστιν ἀναψῆσαι. [...] καὶ ὁ τὸν Αἰγίμιον δὲ ποιήσας εἶθ’ Ἡσιόδοσ ἐστὶν ἢ Κέρκωψ ὁ Μύλησιος· ἐνθα ποτ’ ἔσται ἐμὸν ψυκτῆριον, ὄρχαμε λαῶν.

30. N. ROBERTSON (1980), p. 292.

31. Servius *ad VI*, 392 (*OF* 714B = 296 K): *Lectum est in Orpheo quod quando Hercules ad inferos descendit, Charon territus eum statim suscepit, ob quam rem anno integro in compedibus fuit.* A. BERNABÉ (*OF* 713-716) lists all the testimonies to the Heracleian *katábasis*.

32. M. L. WEST (1983, p. 10, n. 17) seems to confuse these two when he speaks of Prodicus “the famous sophist from Samos”.

33. N. ROBERTSON (1980), p. 281: “Since Perinthus was a colony of Samos which maintained especially close ties with its mother city, there can be no doubt at all that Clement’s Prodicus is the same as the *Suda*’s Herodicus and very little doubt that Prodicus of Samos/Perinthus is the same as the Prodicus of Phocaea whom Paus. IV, 33, 7 mentions as the reputed author of the epic *Minyad*”.

of the Underworld in the Knidian Lesche at Delphi. The quotation Pausanias provides has Theseus and Peirithous venturing through the Underworld.

Polygnotus followed, I think, the poem called the *Minyad*. For in this poem occur lines referring to Theseus and Peirithous: “Then the boat on which embark the dead, that the old Ferryman, Charon, used to steer, they found not within its moorings³⁴.”

The *katábasis* here then appears to be the *katábasis* of Theseus, not of Orpheus, describing the occasion when Theseus went down to the Underworld with Peirithous to abduct Persephone, rather than when the character Orpheus descended in search of Eurydice³⁵. The *Minyad* itself was never actually identified as a poem by Orpheus, but that the *katábasis* of Theseus within it might be connected with an Orphic *katábasis* again suggests that, for the ancient commentators making such connections, the Orphic *katábasis* was not automatically assumed to be a *katábasis* of Orpheus.

While the Prodicus mentioned by Clement may be the same as the Prodicus of Pausanias, other scholars have suggested that Clement’s Prodicus is a corruption of the name Herodicus, which appears in the *Suda*, since the initial letters would be easily confused in manuscripts. Herodicus of Perinthos is not otherwise known, but there is some testimony of a 5th century Herodicus from Selymbria, a town about 30 miles down the Propontis from Perinthos. Herodicus is named in the *Suda* as the teacher of Hippocrates, while Pliny refers to Prodicus of Selymbria as a pupil of Hippocrates³⁶. Plato refers to this Herodicus as a doctor whose exercise

34. Paus., X, 28, 2: Ἐπηκολούθησε δὲ ὁ Πολύγνωτος ἐμοὶ δοκεῖν ποιήσει Μινυάδι· ἔστι γὰρ δὴ ἐν τῇ Μινυάδι ἐς Θησέα ἔχοντα καὶ Πειρίθουον “Ἐνθ’ ἦτοι νέα μὲν νεκυάμβατον, ἦν ὁ γεραίός πορθμὲς ἦγε Χάρων, οὐκ ἔλαβον ἐνδοθεν ὄρου.”

35. N. ROBERTSON (1980), p. 282: “Obviously the *Minyad* contained a *catabasis* – whose we cannot say, unless it was Theseus and Peirithous’ (fr. 1 KINKEL = Paus., X, 28, 2); if so, the encounter between these heroes and the dead Meleager which we find related in [Hes.] frs. 280-281 M-W may come from the *Minyad*. At any rate a *catabasis* figured very prominently in the poem, and this will be the reason why the author of the *Minyad* was later credited with the *Catabasis* of Orpheus”.

36. Pliny, *NH*, XXIX, 4: *Nec fuit postea quaestus modus, quoniam Prodicus, Selymbriae natus, e discipulis eius instituit quam uocant iatralipticen et unctoribus quoque medicorum ac mediastinis uectigal inuenit* (“There was no limit after this to the profits derived from the practice of medicine; for Prodicus, a native of Selymbria, one of his disciples, founded the branch of it known as ‘iatraliptics’, and so discovered a means of enriching the very anointers even and the commonest drudges employed by the physicians”). *Suda* 1564 Hippokrates: Οὗτος μαθητὴς γέγονε τὸ μὲν πρῶτον τοῦ πατρός, μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα Ἡροδίκου τοῦ Σηλυβριανοῦ καὶ Γοργίου τοῦ Λεοντίνου, ῥήτορος καὶ φιλοσόφου· ὡς δὲ τινες Δημοκρίτου τοῦ Ἀβδηρίτου, ἐπιβαλεῖν γὰρ αὐτὸν νέω πρεσβύτην· ὡς δὲ τινες καὶ Προδίκου (“This man was at first a pupil of his father, but after that of Herodicus from Selymbria and the rhetor and philosopher Gorgias from

regimens drag out the life even of those who are inherently unhealthy, struggling against death at all costs through his craft³⁷. Herodicus is not just a medical trainer; however he is also known for his theoretical ideas. An early doxographical medical treatise credits Herodicus with a theory of opposing elements of the body (hot and cold, sharp and bitter) that must be in proper balance³⁸. Such a theory recalls Empedocles, and a poem on the *Descent into Hades* by such an author might well bear the same kind of relation to his other studies as the fragments of Empedocles do to one another³⁹.

Perhaps the most intriguing possibility for the author of an Orphic *katábasis*, or at least an account of the Underworld, is a certain Zopyrus of Heraclea, named by the *Suda* as the Orphicist behind the Orphic *Krater*, *Net*, and *Robe*. While the *Net* and the *Robe* may concern the process by which the soul enters the body, the *Krater* may involve a description of the cosmic system. Scholars have long pointed to the reference in Plutarch's description of the otherworldly journey of Aridaeus / Thespesius to a cosmic krater, which the guide claims is the point reached by Orpheus when seeking his wife, as an allusion to this Orphic *Krater* text. The guide denigrates it as an incomplete vision, since Orpheus wrongly informs people that this is an oracle of Apollo and Night, instead of Night and the Moon⁴⁰. While the oracle of Night is an element that shows up in other Orphic texts, from the Derveni Papyrus to the late *Rhapsodies*, Plutarch links it here with Orpheus' journey to the afterlife to find his wife and to the image of a cosmic krater, suggesting that the *Krater* may have involved some narration of the *katábasis* of Orpheus or even that *Krater* was the title of a work elsewhere described as *Εἰς Ἄιδου κατάβασις*.

Leontini, and as some say he was also a pupil of Democritus of Abdera, for as an old man he devoted himself to the youth; and according to some also [a pupil] of Prodicus").

37. Plato, *Rep.*, 406a-b; cp. *Phdr.*, 227d3-4; *Prot.*, 316d-e. His bad reputation continues in the tradition, as the Hippocratic *Epid.* VI, 3, 18 (Loeb ed., vol. IV, 229) blames him for killing persons with severe healing methods: "H. killed fever patients with burning, much wrestling and hot baths, bad procedure".

38. Pap. Anon. Lond., IV, 40-V, 34. See, e.g., Pap. Anon. Lond., V, 10-16: Ἐκ μέντοι γε τῶν περισσωμάτων ἀποτελεῖσθαι δισσᾶς ὑγρότητας, μίαν μὲν ὀξεῖαν, τὴν δὲ ἑτέραν πικράν, καὶ παρὰ τὴν ἑκατέρας ἐπικράτειαν διάφορα γίνεσθαι τὰ πάθη. Λέγει δὲ ὡς παρὰ τὴν τούτων ἐπίτασιν ἢ ἄνεσιν διάφορα ἀπογεννᾶσθαι τὰ πάθη. For a discussion of the doxography, see Daniela MANETTI (1999).

39. Cp. Emp., fr. 90 = Plut., *Quaest. Conviv.*, IV, 1, 3, 663a: Ὡς γλυκὸν μὲν γλυκὸν μάρπτει, πικρὸν δ' ἐπὶ πικρὸν ὄρουσεν, / ὄξυ δ' ἐπ' ὄξυ ἐβη, δαερὸν δ' ἐποχεῖτο δαιρῶνι ("So sweet lays hold of sweet, and bitter rushes to bitter; acid comes to acid, and warm couples with warm").

40. Plut., *De sera*, 566b-c.

Kingsley indeed suggests that Zopyrus' *Krater* involved a whole description of the Underworld, not as the color-filled celestial vision of Plutarch but rather as a subterranean Underworld filled with fiery, volcanic rivers, and he sees it as the source for much of the imagery in Plato's *Phaedo*⁴¹. The image of a bottomless chasm in the *Phaedo* into which all the rivers of the Underworld flow resembles the cosmic krater in Plutarch, and both resemble the 'vast chasm' (μέγα χάσμα πελώριον) which several Neoplatonists cite from Orpheus⁴². This image in the Neoplatonic *Rhapsodies*, then, may be recycled from the 5th century BCE *Krater* of Zopyrus, which both Plato and Plutarch made use of in their own descriptions of the Otherworld.

Little is known of Zopyrus of Heraclea, but he is likely to be the same Zopyrus listed as Tarentine in Aristoxenus' collection of Pythagoreans in Iamblichus' *Life of Pythagoras*⁴³. P. Kingsley follows H. Diels in arguing that this Pythagorean Zopyrus may also be identified with the engineer of war machines in Biton's 3rd century treatise⁴⁴. Zopyrus then would have been a mechanically-minded thinker in the southern Italian Pythagorean ambit, and it is plausible that his Orphic compositions might have reflected his interests and expertise. The *Net* seems to have been a text that describes the formation of the body in relation to the soul as a net whose somatic loops hold in the ψυχή, and this image, mentioned as Orphic in Aristotle, may have influenced similar ideas in Philolaus' and Plato's *Timaeus*⁴⁵. His

41. P. KINGSLEY (1995), p. 135-143.

42. Proclus, *in Remp.*, II, 138, 8-18 = *OF* 66K = *OF* 111iB; Syrianus (*in Arist., Met.*, 43, 31 = *OF* 111iiiB) claims that Orpheus identifies it with Chaos (Μέγα μὲν αὐτὸ προσειπὼν ὡσπερ ὁ Ὀρφεὺς τὸ χάος "Καὶ μέγα χάσμα πελώριον ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα"), as does Simplicius, who supplies the further description, οὐδέ τι πείραρ ὑπήν, οὐ πυθμὴν, οὐδέ τις ἔδρα (*in Arist., Phys.*, 9, 528, 19 = *OF* 111viiB).

43. Iamb., *VP*, 36, 267, 3.

44. P. KINGSLEY (1995), p. 148: "The fact that the author of the Orphic *Krater* appears to have come from Tarentum and to have belonged to that rare breed of ancient specialist – the professional engineer and mechanic – is hardly a coincidence. The evidence is remarkably consistent, and confirms the conclusion that the poem which lies behind the *Phaedo* myth was by Zopyrus of Tarentine Heraclea."

45. Arist., *Gen. an.*, B1 734a16 (*OF* 404 B = *OF* 26 K): Τὰ οὖν ἄλλα πῶς; ἢ γὰρ τοι ἅμα πάντα γίγνεται τὰ μόρια οἷον καρδία πνεύμων ἦπαρ ὀφθαλμὸς καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἕκαστον, ἢ ἐφεξῆς ὡσπερ ἐν τοῖς καλουμένοις Ὀρφείοις ἐπεσιν· ἐκεῖ γὰρ ὁμοίως φησὶ γίγνεσθαι τὸ ζῶον τῆ τοῦ δικτύου πλοκῆ. Ὅτι μὲν οὖν οὐχ ἅμα καὶ τῆ αἰσθήσει ἐστὶ φανερόν· τὰ μὲν γὰρ φαίνεται ἐνόντα ἤδη τῶν μορίων τὰ δ' οὐ ("How, then, does it make the other parts? For either all the parts, such as the heart, lung, liver, eye, and each of the others, come into being all together or they come into being in succession, as in the so-called verses of Orpheus, for there he says that an animal comes into being in the same way as the weaving of a net. That it is not all at once is apparent even by perception, for some of the parts are clearly visible as already existing while others are not yet"). Cp. Plato, *Ti.*, 73b: "For life's chains, as long as the soul remains bound to the

Krater could likewise have employed images of volcanic and geological processes to discuss the process of incarnation taking place in the Other-world before birth or even a process of cosmic formation, like the image of krater that appears in the *Timaeus* ⁴⁶.

All these hypotheses about the nature of the lost Orphic *katabáseis* must remain, in the absence of evidence, fairly speculative. Nevertheless, the possibility that these Orphic *katabáseis* tales might have recounted the descent of Herakles or Theseus rather than Orpheus himself opens up new avenues for seeking traces of these texts and provides a better understanding of the nature of pre-Platonic Orphica within the Greek epic tradition. Likewise, looking beyond practicing Orpheotelests for the authors of these *katabáseis* allows us to appreciate the way such texts may have been used to explore contemporary medical, mechanical, and other physical ideas. Empedokles' work includes general elemental theories, specific medical imagery, images of the incarnation of the soul, and other discussions of the physical cosmos in a poem that, while it could have no simple and straightforward ritual context, was surely not without relevance to ritual practices of purification. Empedokles' work, fragmentary as our evidence may be, provides a model for understanding these other 'pre-Socratic' thinkers, the Orphicists to whom scholars from the 4th century Epigenes onwards attributed the Orphic *katabáseis* ⁴⁷.

Katabáseis of Orpheus

The *katabáseis* of Orpheus are, quite literally, another story – the story of a mythical poet, whose music is so powerful that it can charm even the lords of death. In contrast to the Orphic *katabáseis*, many actual texts survive which recount or allude to this tale, and many scholars have analyzed them at length. The popularity of this tale long outlived antiquity, and vari-

body, are bound within the marrow, giving roots for the mortal race. [...] So, to preserve (διασώζων) all of the seed, he [the Demiurge] fenced it in with a stony enclosure (περίβολον)". Later, in discussing how the soul departs from the body when it dies of old age, he uses the image of the soul slipping through the interlocking triangles that hold the soul in: "Eventually the interlocking triangles around the marrow can no longer hold on, and come apart under stress, and when this happens they let the bonds of the soul go. The soul then is released in a natural way, and finds it pleasant to take its flight" (Plato, *Ti.*, 81d). Cp. M. L. WEST (1983), p. 10. He compares the idea to Philolaos' number cosmogony in which the world is built up element by element like the loops in a net. C. A. LOBECK (1829, p. 380-381) sarcastically dismisses Eschenbach's suggestion that it refers to a cosmogonic interpretation of Hephaistos' capture of Ares and Aphrodite, like that found in Proclus, *in R.*, 1, 142-143 Kroll.

46. Plato, *Ti.*, 41d.

47. Cp., e.g., Emp., fr. 17 = Clem. Al., *Strom.*, V, 15; Emp., fr. 84 = Arist., *De sens.*, 2, 437b; Emp., fr. 96 = Sophonias, *in Arist. de anima paraphr.*, 32, 21.

ants of it were produced throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance and into the modern era. Orpheus' descent into the Underworld in search of his lost love was the theme for the first operas of the Renaissance as they sought to recreate the music of Greek tragedy, and Orpheus became for the Romantics an archetype of the poet in love⁴⁸. In all these versions, two themes remain central: the power of music or poetry and the power of death to separate lovers.

While some modern tellings may adopt a first person narrative voice, ancient versions all narrate the descent of Orpheus in the third person; another poet uses Orpheus to talk about the power of poetry. The outline of the story remains the same, even while some details – such as the name of Orpheus' lost wife – may differ. Orpheus loses his wife to death on their wedding day and descends to the Underworld to plead with the powers of death to let her return. He sings of his love for his bride, and so powerful is his song that it sways even these notoriously implacable divinities. They grant his prayer to let his wife return, but some disaster occurs on the return journey that prevents them from being happily reunited in life.

Euripides provides the earliest extant version of the tale in an allusion by the chorus in his telling of another tale concerned with love and death, the *Alcestis*⁴⁹. While some scholars have imagined a single, canonical text of the story, which Euripides and later authors either followed or deviated from, like the first item in a manuscript stemma, such a model provides a distorted picture of the transmission of such mythic tales through the Greek and Roman mythical tradition. While Euripides is undoubtedly referring to a myth that is already familiar to his audience, there was never a single, original source text for the tale. The story pattern of the hero descending to the realm of the dead to find a lost loved one is older than any Greek text – it appears, for instance, in the Gilgamesh epic – and such a story doubtless circulated in the oral tradition in many forms before the name of Orpheus was ever introduced into it. The most familiar literary versions are those of Vergil and Ovid, but the attempts to trace their variations to various lost sources is doomed to failure; they shaped the traditional story in response to their own poetic agendas⁵⁰.

48. See the summary in B. HUSS (2010).

49. Eur., *Alc.*, 357-362: Εἰ δ' Ὀρφέως μοι γλῶσσα καὶ μέλος παρῆν, / ὅστ' ἦ κόρην Διμήτρος ἢ κείνης πόσιν / ὕμνοισι κηλήσαντά σ' ἐξ Ἄιδου λαβεῖν, / κατῆλθον ἄν, καὶ μ' οὐθ' ὁ Πλούτωνος κύων / οὐθ' οὐπι κόπη ψυχοπομπὸς ἄν Χάρων / ἔσχον, πρὶν ἐς φῶς σὸν καταστῆσαι βίον.

50. Cp. the convoluted attempts of C. M. BOWRA (1952), which multiply the number of lost texts.

While a story like that of Gilgamesh emphasizes the finality of death – he can't bring Enkidu back and he even loses the plant of immortality –, the Orpheus story stresses the power of poetry or music. The finality of death is nevertheless always part of the tale; as scholars such as F. Graf and J. Heath have shown, Orpheus never lives happily ever after with his Eurydice in any version of the story⁵¹. Some scholars have argued for a happy ending version because some of the evidence that just alludes to the tale makes no mention of the failure, while it does describe Orpheus' success in swaying the Underworld powers. Such an argument mistakes the emphasized element of the story for the whole. As J. Heath comments,

The emphasis is on Orpheus' musical powers to overcome death in any fashion. [...] This says nothing about Eurydice's ultimate return to the surface, but everything about Orpheus' musical ability to charm the lords of the dead⁵².

Death may ultimately be inescapable, an unbreakable parameter of life, but the point of the story is that the powers of love and music can transcend even death.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the *katábasis* of Orpheus has proved a more appealing story than any of the Orphic *katabáseis*. The *katábasis* of Orpheus has been recounted over and over through the ages, while the Orphic *katabáseis* have disappeared, leaving only the faintest of traces. It is important not to confuse the two, however, lest the power of Orpheus' love story overwhelm the few indications that those faint traces of the Orphic *katabáseis* can provide. Discoveries such as the Derveni Papyrus and new work in the ancient doxographies have helped uncover more of the ideas of the early thinkers known as Pre-Socratics, and more progress may be possible if we discard some of the unfounded assumptions of earlier scholars and pay closer attention to the way the ancient writers shaped their categories. At the same time, we can better appreciate the many and varied uses of the Orpheus story if we stop imagining an original version, narrated in Orpheus' own voice, that provided an authentically primitive connection between myth and ritual. As Plato says of the path to Hades, "So the journey is not as Aeschylus' Telephus describes it; for he says it is a simple path that leads to

51. F. GRAF (1986), p. 81-82; J. HEATH (1994).

52. J. HEATH (1994), p. 184, n. 31. Cp. J. HEATH (1994), p. 165: "The evidence suggests that Orpheus' 'victory' is sharply limited to his persuasion of Pluto and/or Persephone to surrender his wife. In this he is extremely and consistently successful – it forms the basis and essential element of the myth in every extant account, demonstrating the supernatural force of the singer's music".

Hades, but to me the path seems to be neither simple nor single”⁵³. Neither the Orphic *katábasis* or the *katábasis* of Orpheus is single or simple, and by separating the two we can glean a better sense of their complexities.

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53. Plato, *Phd.*, 107e4-108a2: Ἔστι δὲ ἄρα ἡ πορεία οὐχ ὡς ὁ Αἰσχύλου Τήλεφος λέγει· ἐκεῖνος μὲν γὰρ ἀπλῆν οἶμόν φησιν εἰς Ἄιδου φέρειν, ἡ δ’ οὔτε ἀπλῆ οὔτε μία φαίνεται μοι εἶναι.

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