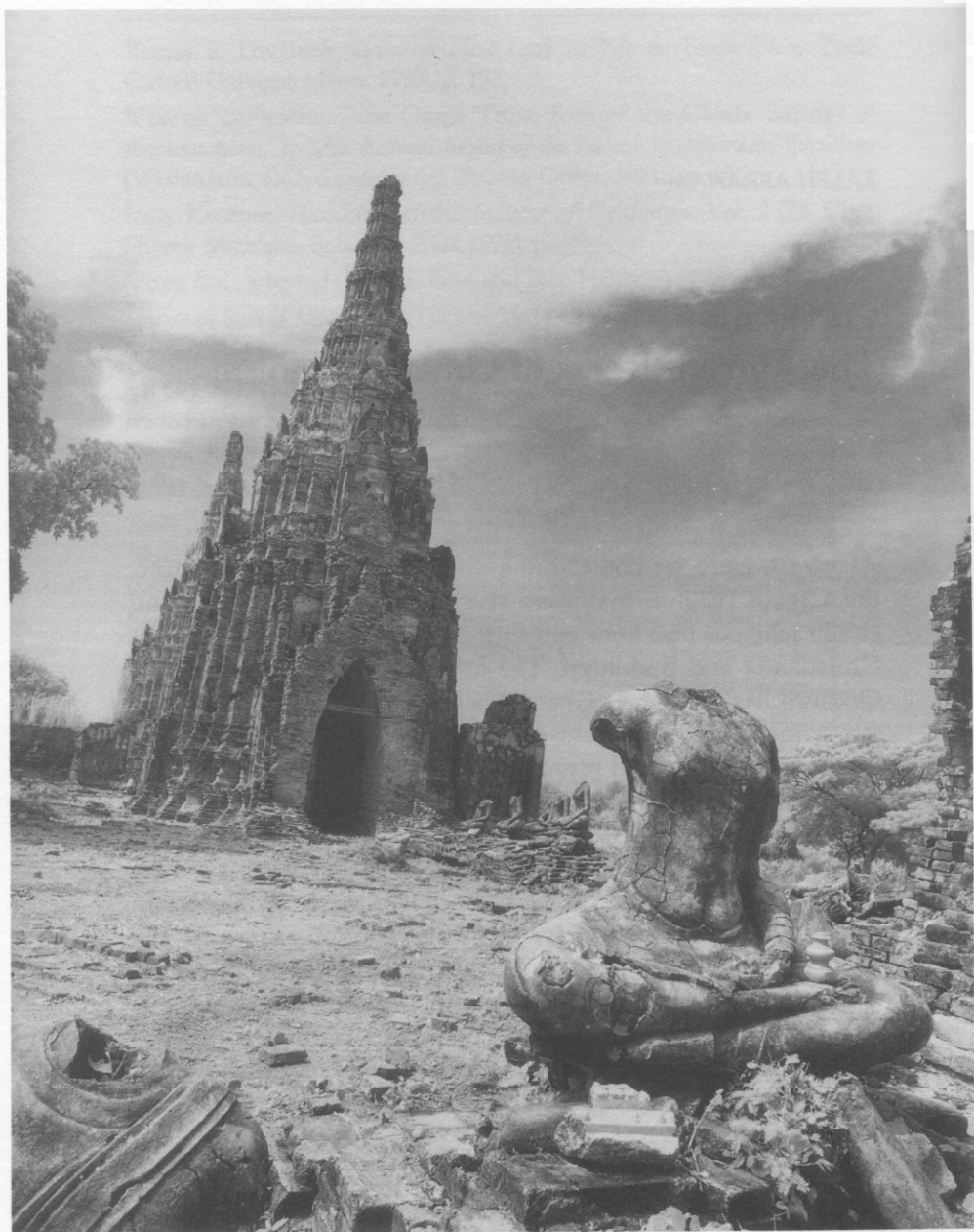


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Orphism: The Ancient Roots of Green Buddhism

Abstract. Here we conjecture a creation scenario for Orphism, the Cretan religion that gave rise to the classical Greek and Hindu religious traditions and thus provides a common origin for Christianity and Buddhism. The archaic trinity that appears in Orphism has the names Chaos, Gaia, and Eros. Thus, these cosmic principles link current developments in both Eastern and Western traditions, and may be an unconscious force behind the current growth of Green Buddhism in Europe and the Americas.

The path of Orphism. What we encompass in this term is a most amazing evolutionary sequence of cognitive maps, myths, rituals, and paradigms. This path spans, in one continuous sweep, the late paleolithic to the present. In spite of being the subject of an enormous scholarly literature spanning two thousand years, it is little known today. Its revival is a perennial occurrence and may be basic to the evolutionary dynamics of consciousness. Here is the briefest of outlines, with pointers to the literature.



The root. The Goddess religion of the late paleolithic (known by its cave art in Europe) and early neolithic (recently unearthed in Asia Minor) may be taken, for our present purposes, as the source of this evolutionary sequence. Diffusion led to a stable equilibrium of this cognitive map over a wide planetary range. Beginning around 4000 B.C.E., patriarchal culture arrived in the Kurgan waves from the Northern steppes, along with horses and the wheeled chariot.¹ This initiated a conflict, culminating in the replacement of the Goddess by gods. Meanwhile, various aspects of the earlier form survived in the West as underground cults and in the East as organized religions. Thus, our story is a continuous undercurrent to the religious histories of Europe and Asia.

The bifurcation. The diffusion of neolithic Orphism from its Anatolian homeland to the West was soon driven underground by the Kurgan waves and their patriarchal aftermath. Meanwhile Orphism diffused Eastward, a longer stretch, finding fertile ground among the Dravidians of the Indus Valley.² This evolved into Shaivism, Jainism, then Sankhya, Yoga, Tantrism, and Buddhism.³ After the arrival of the Vedic Aryans in the second millennium B.C.E., the Indian branch of the Orphic path eventually became overrun by the patriarchal tendency. But it retained other overt characteristics of Orphism: transmigration of the soul, the cycle of births, karma theory, tantrism, love for all life, and vegetarianism. The Aryan domination of Dravidian India culminated around 1200 B.C.E., just as the Minoan culture on Crete was finally suppressed. But while the partnership society and its Orphic ideas were totally repressed to the secret societies, the mystery schools, and the unconscious in the Mediterranean; they survived somewhat overtly to the East. When the chariot wheels ground to a halt in the foothills of the Himalayas, and their baggage of patriarchy and writing settled down, the lines were drawn for history as we know it.

Dionysos/Shiva. In India, the earlier form of Orphism survived in Shaivism and Jainism.⁴ Thus, Shiva replaced the Goddess. In

Minoan Crete, Zeus replaced the Goddess.⁵ Crete is covered with sacred places of Zeus, such as the Idaean cave. In the migration from Crete to Mycenae, Dionysos (also known as Zagreus), the son of Zeus and Semele, rose in importance. Semele is another name of the primeval Goddess. The word *Semele* means Earth in Phrygian. While Dionysos was previously thought to have originated as a Thracian god, the discovery and translation of Linear B tablets from Pylos established his Minoan origin.⁶ The Dionysian cult in Thrace included the immortality of the soul, in common with the contemporary Egyptian and Indian beliefs.⁷ Other features of the Dionysian cult included ecstasy and orgiastic rites. From Thrace, the cult of Dionysos made its way into Greece by way of Asia Minor around 700 B.C.E.⁸ This feature of Orphism, in India, evolved into Tantrism. The similarities among the Shaivite cult in India, the Dionysian in Crete, and the priestly cult in Egypt are particularly interesting. Trade routes from Mesopotamia extended westward to Asia Minor, Crete, and Egypt, and eastward to the Indus. The development of writing followed these routes. The origin of these similar cults in the paleolithic Goddess religion and its culmination in neolithic Anatolia around 7000 B.C.E. is obscured by the gender changes resulting from the patriarchal bifurcation, beginning around 4000 B.C.E. In summary, we are proposing, like Danielou, a common Neolithic origin for Chalcolithic Orphism and Shaivism.

Orpheus/Buddha. Orpheus was a reformer who restored the Dionysian religion to its basic principles, around the same time in which the Buddha performed a similar function in India. Of course, some scholars doubt that Orpheus ever existed as an actual person. However, in legend he was an Argonaut. He lived later than Homer and Hesiod, but before Pythagoras, another initiate of Cretan rites.⁹ Some believe that Orpheus was a Cretan from a much earlier period.¹⁰ Pythagoras, Mahavira (the last prophet of the Jains), and Gautama were contemporaries.

Jane Ellen Harrison (1850-1928) was a professor of classical archeology at Cambridge University, specializing in Greek art and religion. In 1903, she

hazarded the conjecture that Orpheus came from Crete bringing with him, perhaps ultimately from Egypt, a religion of spiritual asceticism, which yet included the ecstasy of the religion of Dionysos.¹¹

Orpheus founded the Dionysiac initiation-mysteries and the secret Orphic sects that worshipped Dionysos. Orphism is more famous and controversial than any other phenomenon of Greek religion. Unlike its predecessors, it has an extensive literature, and was the first Greek religion to have sacred books. It is because of the existence of literature that we have extended the name *Orphism* over the entire path, from the Cro-magnon to the present. Herodotus described the Orphic practices (his is our most ancient surviving testimony of them) as Egyptian and Pythagorean. According to Plato, the Orphics and Pythagoreans were vegetarians and ascetics.¹²

The Rhapsodic Theogony. There was a canon of sacred writings associated with Orphism, the *Orphic Bible*, traditionally ascribed to Orpheus himself. Among the most important of these is the so-called *Rhapsodic Theogony*, an amalgam of twenty-four fragments.¹³ In 1968, Frank Cross, the Biblical archaeologist, introduced a useful distinction between two types of creation myth.

One type is the theogony, the birth and succession of the gods, especially the old gods. Only at the end of the theogony proper do we reach the active or young deities, the great gods of the cult. The second type is the cosmogony, characterized by a conflict between the old and the young gods out of which order, especially kingship, is established in the cosmos.¹⁴

(In writings of this sort, the word god is used for both gods and goddesses.) The Rhapsodic fragments comprise a theogony

in this sense. The central doctrine is "Everything comes out of One and is resolved into One." The Orphic theogony of the Rhapsodies has been compressed as follows:

In the beginning was water and slime; and out of the water and slime was born Chronos (Time), brooding over the universe, a serpent with the head of a bull and a lion at the side and the face of a god between. "Of this Chronos, the ageless one... was born Aither [the bright shining air] and a great yawning gulf" and in the "divine aither great Chronos fashioned a 'silvery egg.'" The egg splits open, and from it hatches Phanes, the first creator deity who is also called Erikepaios, Eros (Love), Dionysos, Zeus, or Protogonos (firstborn). Phanes is the shining one, the revealer; he has "four eyes looking this way and that... golden wings moving this way and that... and he utters the voice of a bull and of a glaring lion." He is "the key of the mind" who "cherishes in his heart swift and sightless Love." He is bisexual, beyond difference, a "very whole animal." As "female and father" he brings forth Night; darkness and light unite to produce Heaven and Earth (Uranos and Ge). At this point the normal "Hesiodic" mythology takes over...¹⁵

Note that the gender transformation of the Goddess (snake) into a god (bull) is well advanced here. There are many versions of the Orphic cosmogony in later Orphic literature. But Martin P. Nilsson, one of the most respected scholars of Greek mythology, wrote in 1935:

The Orphic poems were dependent on earlier epic poetry. It may perhaps be said that they used and reworked it according to their purposes, as later Orphic poets are known to do. This is corroborated by the fact that no other poem is so frequently quoted in the Orphic fragments as precisely the Theogony of Hesiod.¹⁶

The dating of the *Rhapsodic Theogony* is still uncertain, but we will assume here the opinion of Guthrie in 1952, that the Orphic religion took shape in the sixth century B.C.E., from a medley of

Cretan and Thracian traditions, and that Phanes, Eros, Dionysos, and Zeus are one. We will take Hesiod's version as the original Orphic theogony. The sacred texts of Jainism and Buddhism are roughly contemporary of the Orphic Bible. It is possible, as Danielou suggests, that the Orphic path came to India from Anatolia in the early neolithic, developed as early Shaivism among the Dravidians, diffused to Crete as Dionysism before the arrival of the Vedic Aryans in India around 1400 B.C.E., and then moved on to Greece as Orphism.¹⁷ This is an equivalent hypothesis. In any case, our ancient Orphism is identical to Danielou's prehistoric Shaivism.

The Mysteries. The Orphic rites, although originally an underground cult, evolved into a Greek cultural institution, much like the Masonic Lodge of our own times. Called the Mysteries, there were various versions established at different temples. The most famous and influential were the *Eleusinian Mysteries*, said to derive from the Egyptian rites of Isis. After a millennium or so, the arrival of Orphism transformed the Mysteries, adding the Sacred Marriage and the Sacred Birth: rites of union with the divine, as well as the doctrine of immortality.¹⁸ Although these were so secret that to reveal them carried the death penalty, there are many oblique references to them in ancient Greek literature. Many of these references were collected, translated, and woven into a commentary by Thomas Taylor, the Platonist who influenced Blake and the Transcendentalists.¹⁹ The Eleusinian rites included initiation or lesser mysteries, fasting, training in the meaning of the rites, and finally, the sacred orgies. Celebrated every fifth year, for eight days beginning on the fifteenth of September, these involved purification, sacrifices, processions, singing and dancing, games, washing in holy water, and initiation in the mystic temple: an Epiphany. This divine illumination has been described as a group psychedelic experience by Gordon Wasson and others.²⁰ These rites were celebrated at Eleusis regularly for over two thousand years, until the fourth century C.E.

Two roots. A river of Orphic diffusion is apparent: from Old Europe and Asia Minor to Babylonia, to Crete and Egypt, to Mycenae, to Greece, and to us. Another goes from Asia Minor to India, and all Asia. Note that the route from Babylon to Ugarit to Crete to Mycenae to Athens is practically a straight line. So also is the route from Babylon to the Indus and to the Lumbini Grove of Gautama's birth. Two streams merge at the source of this river. The Great Mother stream from neolithic Anatolia, and the patriarchal stream of the divine king and son of god. In the West, these become the underworld, or collective unconscious, and the mundane world, or consensual reality, respectively. In the East, they become different cults of organized religion, such as the Mahayana and Hinayana. Tracing the twin sources of this river through the mists of prehistory to their roots among *Homo Erectus*, the glaciers, and the proto-Indo-Europeans, will be a challenge for the future.

Bacchism/Tantrism. In Roman times, Dionysos was renamed Bacchus; his followers, Bacchantes; and the rites, Bacchanalia. The mysteries continued in various forms into the Christian era, were revived in the Renaissance, and again in our time. Meanwhile, Jainism and Shaivism joined, creating Mahayana Tantrism. This variety of Orphism was protected in Tibet, and elsewhere in Asia, reaching us intact in modern times.

Summary. In this essay, we have reconstructed an evolutionary sequence from the widespread Goddess religion of the late paleolithic up to the present, under the name *Orphism*. Among the recognizable features of this tradition are vitalism, animism, reincarnation, the journey of the soul, karma theory, vegetarianism, love for all life, mystical illumination, sexual and ecstatic (tantric) rites, asceticism, feminism, and more.²¹ The Eleusinian mysteries are particularly important in the context of our current revolutions of Chaos, Gaia, and Eros, as a model partnership of chaos and order. The derivatives of Orphism include Neo-Pythagoreanism, Buddhism, and the fabulous social transformations of the present time. A bolus of Orphic energy was appar-

ently released during the 1960s, which is bringing forth from the Western Unconscious a massive revival of Orphic features. Among the fruits of the Orphic tree in our own culture are the Chaos Revolution and Gaia Hypothesis of the sciences, and the current growth of Green Buddhism in Europe and North America. Our future may depend vitally on the nourishment and recovery of our lost pagan heritage. What else is waiting there for our rediscovery?

NOTES

¹These Kurgan waves may have also brought the proto-Indo-European language to Europe. For several sides to this controversial question, see Susan Nacev Skomal and Edgar C. Palome, *Proto-Indo-European: The Archeology of a Linguistic Problem: Studies in Honor of Marija Gimbutas* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of Man, 1987); Colin Renfrew, *Archeology and Language: the puzzle of Indo-European origins* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987); and J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archeology and Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989).

²The Cretan language has affinities with Dravidian, according to Alain Danielou and K. F. Hurry, tr., *Shiva and Dionysus, The Religion of Nature and Eros* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1979/1984), p. 22.

³See the entry on Jainism by Hermann Jacobi in James Hastings, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Scribners, 1955), pp. 465-474.

⁴See Chapter 1, Origins, in Danielou and Hurry, *Op. cit.*, where the Cretan Dionysos is seen as an import from India. Also, see Thomas Taylor and Alexander Wilder, ed., *The Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries, a Dissertation*, Third Ed. (New York: J. W. Bouton, 1875), p. 158. The fact that the Sanskrit literature was unknown in Taylor's time is partly responsible for the fact that this connection is not well known today.

⁵See Chapter 1 of Carl Kerényi and Christopher Holme, tr., *Zeus and Hera: Archetypal Image of Father, Husband, and Wife* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), for the etymology of the word Zeus.

⁶See Walter Burkert and John Raffan, tr., *Greek Religion, Archaic and Classical* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1977/1985), p. 162, and Carl Kerényi and Ralph Manheim, tr., *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

⁷See Erwin Rohde and W. B. Hillis, tr., *Psyche, The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1925/1950), Ch. 8, who see Thrace as the origin of this belief, and Kerényi and Manheim, *Op. cit.*

⁸See Ch. 2 of Walter F. Otto and Robert B. Palmer, tr., *Dionysus, Myth and Cult* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1933/1965), and also Martin P. Nilsson, *Minoan-Mycenean Religion and its Survival*, second revised edition (Lund: Gleerup, 1950/1968).

⁹Proclus says that Pythagoras was an initiate of the Orphic mysteries.

¹⁰See Emmet Robbins, "Famous Orpheus," in John Warden, ed., *Orpheus, The Metamorphosis of a Myth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), pp. 3-24.

¹¹See p. xi, and Ch. 9, of Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (New York: Meridian, 1955).

¹²See K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion, A Study of the Orphic Movement* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), p. 16.

¹³See K. C. Guthrie, "Early Greek Religion in the Light of the Decipherment of Linear B," in *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 6 (1959), pp. 35-46.

¹⁴See Frank Moore Cross, "The Olden Gods in Ancient Near Eastern Creation Myths," in Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller, Jr., eds. *Magnalia Dei, The Mighty Acts of God: Essays of the Bible and Archeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright* (New York : Doubleday, 1976), p. 329.

¹⁵See p. ix of the Introduction, in Emmet Robbins, *Op. cit.*, based on Guthrie's translation.

¹⁶See p. 198 of Martin P. Nilsson, "Early Orphism and Kindred Religious Movements," in *The Harvard Theological Review* 28 (3) pp. 181-230 (July 1935).

¹⁷See Danielou and Hurry, *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹⁸See Harrison, *Op. cit.*, p. xi, and Ch. 10.

¹⁹See Taylor, *Op. cit.*, including the introduction by Wilder.

²⁰See R. Gordon Wasson, Carl A. P. Ruck, and Albert Hoffmann, *The Road to Eleusis, Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), Ch. 1.

²¹I highly recommend Arthur Evans, *The God of Ecstasy, Sex Roles and the Madness of Dionysos* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).