APPENDIX II

ICONOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON THE ORPHIC TABLETS

Selection of illustrations and commentaries by
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Drawings by Sara Olmos
The following pages are approximations to the religious world of the Orphic tablets from the viewpoint of iconography. Each of the images collected here establishes a dialogue, sometimes necessarily conjectural and imprecise, with the contents of the texts. In general, the reader will not find a reproduction or faithful copy of literary quotations in these representations, for word and image are ruled by their own laws, and develop in their own environments and contexts. Not always coinciding interests canalize the realization of both aspects.

Since the 19th cent., researchers have tried to see in some images certain correlations to throw light upon the more obscure contents of Orphism. The modes of approximation have varied over the course of the years. Our vision, still uncertain, is today more rich and nuanced than it was then. The volume of documents has grown. Above all, viewpoints and readings have broadened.

In our text, the images will guide us along multiple paths towards the environment of Orphism. Some of them are mere thematic allusions. In other cases, we can see that the correspondence between world and figuration is more precise and direct.

The first two examples introduce us to the funerary meaning of reading, the psychological relation between the deceased and the written text. Thus, the woman reading, with the unrolled volumen, in number 1 (according our numbering), which decorates a lekythos, a vase intended for the grave; or the man on the Apulian vase—number 2—who receives a visit from Orpheus the citharist. He listens to him, seated within the naïskos—his temple and, at the same time, his grave—with a roll in his hand. The initial moment of the passage is represented. Does the roll contain a text with Orphic instructions? We do not know for certain. However, a mediating Orpheus, dressed in the rich attire of an Oriental bard, knows the way towards the subterranean palace of Persephone and Pluto on the Apulian vase, which we describe in number 5.

We also include two pinakes or small votive pictures, in clay, from the southern Italian sanctuary of Locri. They allow us a glimpse into the reign of Persephone and Pluto, the solemn gods of the Beyond (n. 3); or else they describe Dionysus in his mediating visit to the infernal worlds (n. 4), a situation we will later encounter in another Apulian vase, n. 6, where the agreement between Dionysus and Pluto is narrated in the form of a dextrarum iunctio. The terracotta from Locri with a dancing maenad who brandishes a tambourine or a tympanon is